Unit: Life Choices

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Introduction
The significant choices that people make in their lives are the result of extraordinarily complex processes based on values, beliefs, ethical stance, goals in life and hopes for the future. Such choices have consequences that impinge on one’s personal, relational and spiritual identity and may also impact on one’s family and on society itself. The growth and development of each individual is complex, and the world of the 21st century poses challenges and opportunities for young people that didn’t exist before. Changing family structure and dynamics are a reality. Access to information, communication and technology occur at a previously inconceivable speed. Globalisation, economic restructuring, technological advances and social trends have dramatically altered the working environments of people in many countries throughout the world. Australia’s labour market has undergone considerable change, becoming a flexible and versatile extension of the globalised workplace – or the ‘21st century’ world of work. Arguably, the most significant workplace change is the concept that a ‘job for life’ is no longer a reality. Most individuals will likely change jobs, if not careers, numerous times throughout their working life. Most individuals can no longer rely on one-off vocational training gained early in their working life; they will need to constantly learn and update their skill set to meet changing demands.
Transferable skills such as communication, critical thinking and teamwork, and personal attributes such as adaptability, resilience, resourcefulness, creativity and enterprise will increase an individual’s employability in this changing work environment.


Most young people traverse this complexity with relative ease while others will need to acquire new skills in order to embrace life’s changes and all life has to offer.

Yet this is also a time in which young people face great difficulties. Many are unable to find employment, frequently drifting to the larger cities where the pressures of isolation, loneliness and unemployment lead them into destructive situations. Some are tempted to drug abuse and other forms of addiction, and even to suicide. Yet in these situations too, young people are often searching for the life that only Christ can offer them. It is imperative therefore that the
Church proclaim the Gospel to the young in ways that they can understand, ways that can enable them to grasp the hand of Christ who never ceases to reach out to them, especially in their dark times. #44 Ecclesiae in Oceania of His Holiness Pope John Paul II 2001.

Despite the sometimes grim predictions of the future, Christians are secure in the knowledge that they are not alone.

At the root of every vocational journey there is the Emmanuel, the God-with-us. He shows us that we are not alone in fashioning our lives, because God walks with us, in the midst of our ups-and-downs, and, if we want it, God weaves with each of us a marvellous tale of love, unique and irreproducible, and, at the same time, in harmony with all humanity and the entire cosmos. John Paul II Life is a Vocation. 2000

As the educational arm of the Catholic Church, Catholic school communities are in a unique position to support learners to become resilient people, capable of dealing with change and with times of challenge and adversity. One way of doing this is to incorporate personal and social development into its curriculum. The focus of this Religion and Ethics unit is on the positive aspects of life in which growing up is a time of hope and promise, and for developing the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary to become life-long learners. This unit can assist learners to have a clear picture of who they are as individuals, how they relate to others and contribute to their community, and how to effectively cope with change and challenge throughout their lives. Paraphrased from Living Life to the Full - Personal and Social Development Education Guidelines, Brisbane Catholic Education, 2005.

Within the Catholic Christian tradition, personal and social development education focuses upon the lifelong journey toward wholeness, from egoism to self-giving love as a person created in the image of God and one who contributes to the common good. Understood in the light of Jesus Christ, the human person is someone who is called to a life of self-giving love; and it is in and through self-giving love that one achieves human development and fulfilment.

I have come so that you may have life and have it in abundance. John 10:10
Through personal and social development, learners are empowered to shape and enrich their changing world and enact the roles of lifelong learning. In particular, the vision is for learners to develop as resilient young people who:

- Have a clear sense of self and a preferred future
- Are capable of coping with challenge and change
- Communicate effectively
- Make healthy choices and decisions
- Engage in positive relationships with others
- Contribute to the community.

**Possible, Probable and Preferred Futures**

Past, present and future can be perceived as being in a dynamic, embedded relationship. Interpretations of the past grow out of our present concerns and prioritisations and out of our (conscious or unconscious) perceptions of the future. Likewise, both our present images of the future and the future itself are shaped by our current preoccupations and interpretations (including our interpretations of the past) and by our ongoing decision-making and action-taking. Imagining a preferred future creates an excitement and optimism for the future and provides a framework for decision making in the present that could prepare you to achieve that future.

**Identity and a sense of self**

The questions “Who Am I?”; “What am I about?”; How am I different from/similar to others?”; Where am I going?” and “Who is the real me?” are perhaps as old as the human capacity for self-reflection. The question of personal identity is regarded in philosophy as one of the ultimate questions of existence that thinkers of every generation have sought to answer. It is also a fundamental “religious” question, for it is part of the human search for meaning.

These questions are closely connected to a subsequent question: “What is it to be human?” On the one hand, we strive for a sense of our own uniqueness, wanting to be singled out for recognition, status and love. We want to be independent, to make our own decisions, to form our own conscience. On the other hand, our feelings of separateness can give rise to isolation.
and loneliness. Humans have an innate sense of being part of a community of others. Human identity then, is not only to have a sense of self, but also a sense of self-and-others. The relatively modern sciences of Anthropology and Psychology have joined philosophy and religion in the quest to assist humans of every generation to achieve self-actualisation and make meaning of their existence.

The Catholic Church’s teaching on the meaning and context of human existence is clear: God is the creator of the whole world and remains present to it. All created things are good because they come from the creative hand of God. Humans are the crown of divine creation. The dignity of the human person resides in the person’s intimate relationship with God. The human person has a soul - the transcendental dimension of human existence. We are, at the same time, essentially oriented to other people. Human existence is social existence. Despite being limited by sin, our human condition is emboldened by grace. We are plagued by weakness and a sense of the finitude of death. We experience ourselves as limited creatures and this generates a sense of anxiety. We are called by God to open ourselves to love and live in harmony with the environment and we are empowered to do so by grace and especially by the grace of Jesus Christ. Death is not the end of human existence. Life is changed, not taken away. We are destined for glory.

Values
Part of knowing who we are and what drives our decision making is being able to identify our values.

Our values are those things we care about, that matter to us; those goals and ideals we aspire to and by which we measure ourselves, or others, or our society.

Values are the silent forces behind many of our actions and decisions. “Bad” or questionable values count too. To understand values and their impact on life, individuals can engage in processes of discernment. Reflection upon an action or response and seeking out the underpinning values that may have driven that action or response, is a process of discernment that can assist personal development, maturity and well-being. Discernment processes
promote deeper understanding of the human condition and reveal through reflection the silent forces behind human action. Discernment also develops an individual's authenticity and moral integrity.

One process of discerning values incorporates the application of the concepts of life-giving or life-defying qualities to the values being considered. During such a process individuals can explore whether the values that are driving them are life-giving or life-defying i.e. they are promoting health, authenticity and integrity or they are promoting ill health, unauthenticity or a lack of integrity. It is important that individuals develop processes of discernment and self-reflection to critique their values. Such critique can affirm existing values and ways of being, or facilitate new or changed life paths and values. An individual's or group's values can change or at least be acted out differently in different times and contexts. Therefore it is essential that individuals and groups engage in familiar and evolving discerning processes. This is particularly important during challenging and changing circumstances and contexts.

**Moral values are those values that give voice to the needs and legitimate expectations of others, as well as ourselves.**

Moral values connect us to a larger world and introduce the question of what others are entitled to ask from us *(the needs of others as well as ourselves)* and what we are entitled to ask from them and from ourselves *(legitimate expectations)*. By *others* we usually understand other people. However, the term may also include other animals and the natural world too.

There is a transcendent reference point for religious values. Religious values are ethical principles founded in religious traditions, texts and beliefs. In a Christian sense, religious values are embodied in Jesus Christ, as passed on in Scripture and the historical realities of communities of the faith Tradition.

Living life in line with one’s values is important for a sense of well-being, self-respect and self-esteem. Living a life which violates one’s values can lead to confusion, frustration and depression. People who value a family but work long hours, resulting in spending little quality time with partners and/or children, would be acting in contradiction with their values. Valuing
one's health but taking no exercise or care in what one eats is in conflict with the value. We can confuse other people's values with our own. We may have been "handed down" values through our family or religion, but if we examine them closely we may realise that they are not truly owned by us. Values may also change with circumstances and priorities. They are often influenced by external forces such as media, governments, economic circumstances and one's social group. They are also influenced by internal factors such as our personality, our upbringing, our enculturation and our relationships. Values are often culturally and even gender specific. Some social commentators believe that Western society has moved to an age of individualism and even into a moral vacuum where nations and whole communities no longer share common values. Knowing ourselves, our values and our beliefs assists us to make decisions and to lead an authentic life. Knowing oneself allows the conception of a preferred future and to set a path that is consistent with achieving this preferred future.

Coping with Challenge and Change

Most people are well equipped to cope with the daily challenges and disappointments in life. Unexpected setbacks such as illness, relationship breakdowns, career disappointment or financial hardship will unfortunately affect most people's lives at some point, and the ability to rebuild or bounce back will impact on one's subsequent quality of life. For Christians, knowing that one isn’t alone in the journey is an important component of the recovery. A belief in the Paschal mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ helps Christians to know that one has to have Good Fridays to experience resurrection.

Every one of us we will undergo "dark nights of the soul". It's important to understand this because our natural tendency in any crises (illness, rejection, failure, disappointment, exclusion, broken relationships) is to see only the negative and not see that, in this crumpling, there is a needed purification and there is an invitation from God to a new maturity.

Ron Rolheiser, 2003

There are also practical skills that can be taught to assist with the development of social and emotional well-being.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a process for helping people to live life in all its fullness. These skills include recognising and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and
handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. They are the skills that allow people to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully and make ethical and safe choices. [http://casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel/](http://casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel/)

**The Five SEL Competencies and their Skill Sets**

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<th>Self-Awareness</th>
<th>Relationship skills</th>
<th>Social Awareness</th>
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<td>Identifying emotions</td>
<td>Social engagement</td>
<td>Perspective taking</td>
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<td>Accurate self-perception</td>
<td>Building relationships</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
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<td>Recognising strengths</td>
<td>Working cooperatively</td>
<td>Appreciating diversity</td>
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<td>Sense of self confidence</td>
<td>Resolving conflicts</td>
<td>Respect for others</td>
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<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Helping/Seeking help</td>
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<th>Self-Management</th>
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<td>Impulse control</td>
<td>Problem identification</td>
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<td>Stress management</td>
<td>Situation analysis</td>
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<td>Self-discipline</td>
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<td>Self-motivation</td>
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<td>Goal setting</td>
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<td>Organisational skills</td>
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The healthy development of these skills will assist learners to make good decisions. A healthy spiritual life that includes stillness, meditation and reflection is also a vital component of holistic well-being. While spirituality is difficult to precisely define, it is about embracing the meaning of life, finding our purpose and living it. Spirituality is not something removed from life, but at the centre of life. Spirituality draws forth creation and form and flow out of the chaos of everyday living. A religious tradition can provide pathways for deeper understanding and spiritual formation.

**The Purpose of Work**

Making a contribution to the community and the common good is a Christian imperative and is a key theme of Catholic social teaching. Living life, choosing a career, choosing one’s level of consumerism and one’s carbon footprint, choosing how to treat ourselves and others all should reflect the inviolable belief about the dignity of the human person made in God’s image.
Decisions about careers will be based on gifts and talents, interests and values and by necessity may be made a number of times throughout one’s life. The type and value of work, the commitment it requires and the rewards gained should all be considered.

All work has a threefold moral significance. First, it is a principle way that people exercise the distinctive human capacity for self-expression and self-realization. Second, it is the ordinary way for human beings to fulfill their material needs. Finally, work enables people to contribute to the well-being of the larger community. Work is not only for one’s self. It is for one’s family, for the nation, and indeed for the benefit of the entire human family. Economic Justice for All #97

What is a vocation?

In its simplest terms, ‘vocation’ means a call. In religious terms, vocation is a call from God to salvation and holiness. This means that your vocation is what God calls you to do with your life and how you respond to that call. Through baptism, Christians enter into the beginning of a unique lifelong vocation of service to community and parish life. There are many ways to live out the mystery of a Christian baptismal vocation. Individual vocations include: living a single life, a married life, or a religious life. A religious vocation may include priesthood, contemplative or monastic life, joining a religious order or living a lay consecrated life.

“Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny....to work out our identity in God.”

Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation

Pope Paul VI described all life as a vocation. John Paul II explained, that by thinking in this way, one could acknowledge life as a gift.

To consider life as a vocation encourages interior freedom, stirring within the person a desire for the future, as well as the rejection of a notion of existence that is passive, boring, and banal. In this way, life takes on the value of a "gift received which, by its nature, tends to become a good given." (Document New Vocations for a New Europe, 1997, 16, b). Life as a vocation JPII 2000

No one job should be considered to be more or less important than another. One’s occupation is one’s ministry in the world. Bus drivers have a “vocation” if they give themselves to their role. “Vocation” is a fundamental dimension of a person’s life’s work and sense of self.
If it falls to our luck to be street-sweepers, sweep the streets, like Raphael painted pictures, like Michaelangelo carved marble, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, and like Beethoven composed music. Sweep the streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth would have to pause and say ... Here lived a great street sweeper.

-- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., June 20, 1965, Kingston, Jamaica)

It is imperative that no one ... would indulge in a merely individualistic morality. The best way to fulfil one's obligations of justice and love is to contribute to the common good according to one's means and the needs of others, and also to promote and help public and private organizations devoted to bettering the conditions of life.

The Church and the Modern World, #30

Leading an ethical life

The Ten Commandments constitute the foundation of Christian law and ethics. These capture the twofold law. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and all your strength.” (Mark 12:30) Likewise, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) provide examples of Jesus’ love for people and provide a map for Christian life. they sustain hope and proclaim blessings and rewards of life in Christ. The Beatitudes teach that true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, fame, power, or material achievement but in good relationships with others. The social teachings of the Catholic Church are based on the belief in the inviolable dignity of the human person and a consistent ethic of life calling all Christians to strive towards full humanity and to be agents of change in the world.

An ethical approach to life does not preclude enjoyment or having fun but it does change one’s sense of priorities. Unfortunately, there will always be people who don’t care for anyone or anything, (not even themselves) and there are more people who will make their living by exploiting others, especially the poor and the powerless. However, choosing to live a life based less on self-interest and more on contributing to the common good and making the world a better place will lead one towards a more fulfilling, interesting and happy life. If enough people choose to do this they can become a critical mass for change in the world. It is not enough to give money to the poor, vote
for the Green party and disapprove of the government’s immigration policy if one does nothing about changing one’s own practices, consumerism, attitudes and actions.