

## Forming Disciples of Jesus in Parish and School

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*This is the seventh article in a series on adolescent catechesis sponsored by the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis, a collaborative effort by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL) and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) with support from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to enhance the quality of adolescent catechesis in parishes and schools.*

The answer to question six of the “Baltimore Catechism” explains that God made us to know, love, and serve him “in this world, and to be happy with him forever” in the next. This succinct answer delineates the three essential tasks of adolescent catechesis: to help the learner to know, to love, and to serve God.

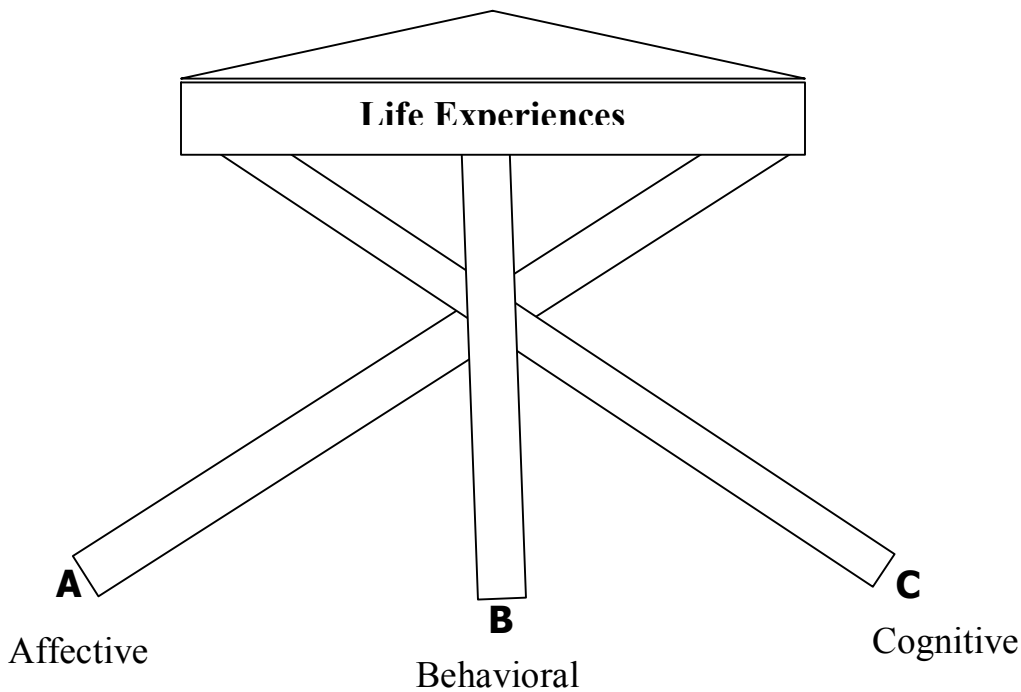
In order to accomplish these tasks, I suggest a catechetical framework for discipleship formation that replicates a tripod structure, using the three equal legs of the tripod to create a program with a solid foundation. For the structure to stand firmly, balance is needed between the legs: No one leg can support the structure’s weight alone or if the weight is distributed disproportionately. The *National Directory for Catechesis* (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005 [NDC]) seems to make this point when it says “it does not do justice to catechesis to think of it as instruction alone” (NDC, No. 35). Instead, the *Directory* broadens catechesis beyond instruction by identifying the work of catechesis as being “to proclaim Christ’s message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead people to worship and prayer, and to motivate them to serve others” (NDC, No. 213).

How do parishes and schools, as the two main vehicles of adolescent catechesis, follow the wisdom of these documents and employ a tripod construct to provide a firm foundation for the creation of vibrant ministries that will effectively form youth as Jesus’ disciples? What can parishes and schools learn from the other and what can each offer to the other?

The accompanying image illustrates the components necessary for an effective, comprehensive catechetical approach to forming disciples. The legs (A, B, and C) illustrate the

planned approaches to formation. The seat shows the integration that occurs through living. Together, these approaches lead to a comprehensive formation approach.

### **A Tripod Construct for Adolescent Catechesis**



### **The Affective Construct**

#### *Loving/Heart/Context/Faith Formation*

This leg's main focus is to help young people, who hunger for transcendent experiences, love God. By providing avenues for youth to commune affectively with and experience God, we teach them to speak with their heart. The church must speak to the reality in which young people live in order to put them in direct connection with Jesus Christ. This is best explained by the word "relationship." We must help young people form a relationship with Christ and the church. In *Renewing the Vision*, the U.S. bishops explain that prayer and worship with adolescents "celebrates and deepens young people's relationship with Jesus Christ through the bestowal of grace, communal prayer and liturgical experiences (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, p. 44).

The *General Directory for Catechesis* identifies the challenge of “context” and notes that it is necessary to adapt catechesis “in order to translate” Jesus’ message “into the terms” of young people without betraying the message (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, GDC No. 185). The family is a critical context for teens. Parents have a direct bearing upon their child’s faith development. Most U.S. teenagers follow in their parents’ footsteps when it comes to religion. “The best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents do look like” (*Soul Searching* by Smith and Denton, 2005, p. 261).

## **The Behavioral Construct**

### *Serving/Hands/Methodology/Discipleship*

This aspect applies what young people learn and experience in imitating Jesus. If teens clearly know Catholic beliefs, practices, and values and can articulate their own faith experiences, it makes sense that they will have success behaving as Jesus’ disciples.

Those who work with young people have become aware of the importance of methodology in discipleship formation. We need only look at the ultimate model himself, Jesus Christ, to see that it is not just what we teach but how we teach it and live it that is of supreme importance. The messenger does affect the message, and lived experience is crucial in internalizing the head and heart knowledge. For young people, truth is verified by experience. Our methodologies must reflect this reality as we develop relevant catechetical practices.

## **The Cognitive Construct**

### *Knowing/Head/Content/Religious Education*

The cognitive construct deals with the intellectual appropriation of faith practices, precepts, and beliefs. Knowledge of God, in this leg, is demonstrated through articulation. Until recently, it often was considered the primary “leg” of catechesis. While programs of intentional instruction generally lead to higher levels of faith articulation, simply participating in religious activities, classes or programs does not guarantee that teens automatically will understand Catholic precepts, practices, or beliefs. Churches and schools must find ways to bridge the cognitive gap and assist young people intentionally in appropriating Catholic fundamentals.

Without a firm grasp of the essentials of Catholic belief, young people are at the mercy of whatever religious whim sweeps past them.

## **Application to Parishes and Schools**

According to Christian Smith in *Soul Searching* (Smith and Denton, 2005), a report based upon the National Study on Youth and Religion, current efforts at faith formation are not effective. According to Smith, young people today may participate in the church's sacramental life, attend Catholic school or a parish youth ministry program, and still not know or follow the church's moral tenants. According to Smith, teens seem happy simply to go along to get along.

I believe that by implementing this tripod construct, the catechetical formation for young people will be strengthened both in Catholic schools and in youth ministry programs.

### *Affective Construct Applied to Schools and Parishes*

The primary concern of the Affective Construct is touching the hearts of the students and helping them to grow in their relationship with Christ and the church.

Schools often are challenged in their efforts to provide a robust program of faith formation because of competing priorities. Research by Dr. Tim Cook of Creighton University suggests that there is disagreement among religion faculty members about whether the intended outcome of religion class is knowledge of the faith or living the faith. Tight schedules can limit the amount of time that can be dedicated to affective activities and the school setting can limit the types of activities offered.

That said, Catholic high schools are stepping up their efforts to address the affective construct. Greater emphasis is being placed on the role of campus ministry. In many cases campus ministry has been made a part of the school's administrative office and not simply another department. Efforts are being made to coordinate the activities of the Catholic high school with activities in local parishes so that young people see themselves as belonging to both communities. Retreat and service activities have become essential pieces of the school's faith formation plan. Finally, because the bond that develops in high school often is the strongest influence on young people, schools accomplish great things when they develop a strong Catholic identity for and within the school.

Parishes traditionally have excelled in affective faith development because this is where they have placed the greatest effort. Effective coordinators of youth ministry recognize the importance of establishing an environment characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and concern for youth. Parishes can provide a multigenerational, spiritual community that expresses love and acceptance for the young people and offers them the opportunity to engage in meaningful faith experiences. Parish programs usually operate on flexible schedules and in spaces more conducive to affective activities. However, when parishes are isolated from students' daily lives it is hard to build a relationship between the parish and the student.

Both schools and parishes struggle to address the young person's family context. Parishes are better suited to reach out to families and to provide instruction for adults toward ongoing conversion. Schools tend to do a better job at engaging adults in their children's activities through sporting and academic events. Both need to improve aspects of their programs.

#### *Behavioral Construct Applied to Schools and Parishes*

The second leg of the tripod, the Behavioral Construct, focuses on Christian living and practices. Often this falls under the heading of "service activities."

Schools, in general, have made service learning a significant part of the curriculum. Through these activities they also have added new opportunities for young people to have experiential faith opportunities. However, in order to be effective, service projects must incorporate intentional theological reflection into the process so that students do not see these opportunities simply as hoops to jump through. Because schools can offer programs across the curriculum, these service opportunities can be placed in proper context in many different settings. Schools that integrate current methodologies throughout their campus produce dynamic, highly motivated, faithful teens.

By utilizing hands-on, experiential-based methodologies through active campus ministries, meaningful liturgies and service programs, schools make great strides in helping students become not just hearers of the word, but doers as well (Lk 6:49). When leading by example, school faculties show how Catholic values and beliefs can be lived throughout one's life.

Parishes are designed to assist young people in the living of their faith. An effective community of believers regularly engages youth in opportunities to experience the horizontal

dimension of faith. Parish settings generally are freer than schools to allow creative methodologies to be used and can plan for more effective dynamic activities and outings that can last for significant periods of time. There are limitless opportunities to engage young people in connecting to others in parish settings, allowing the young people to make meaning out of suffering and experience the guidance of mentors who help them to make an active commitment to discipleship.

Both parishes and schools can improve at helping young people engage the local community, the wider society and the world at large over issues guided by Catholic teaching and values. Both can do a better job at linking young people to Catholic networks and finding for them men and women of faith who can be personal witnesses and mentors in discipleship. Both also can do a better job at helping young people freely commit to discipleship and readily conform their lives in word and deed to follow Jesus. Finally, both need to find more ways of coordination, cooperation and collaboration with each other if this is to succeed.

#### *Cognitive Construct Applied to Schools and Parishes*

The last leg of the tripod, the Cognitive Construct, is an intentional and systematic course of study designed to provide young people with a solid foundation in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The cognitive construct is easiest for schools to achieve because they are structured to foster faith knowledge and its articulation. Instructors have daily contact with young people and systematically present fundamental Catholic theology, practices and beliefs, increasing retention and articulation. Students have a vested interest in learning because they receive grades for their efforts. Most teachers are professional educators who understand learning styles and appropriate teaching methodologies and who often have advanced degrees in theology. Structured learning environments foster the use of textbooks that provide a consistent and comprehensive curriculum.

Whereas schools generally offer religion classes three to five days a week, most parish adolescent catechetical programs meet only once a week, if not less frequently. In addition, volunteers who often lack professional teaching credentials and experience often run the programs. Because there is no compulsion to attend, attendance can fluctuate greatly from session to session, caused frequently by the extremely busy schedules lived by modern teens.

However, these stumbling blocks do not prevent parish programs from presenting solid, cognitive courses of study. During the last decade, greater emphasis has been placed on developing courses of study designed for weekly sessions; these usually are produced as three to six lesson mini-courses. Many knowledgeable, well-formed leaders have been prepared to instruct young people effectively and systematically. In addition, much effort has gone into developing instructional approaches that work effectively in informal (retreat setting), non-gathered (Internet courses) or non-classroom (work camp) settings, along with the increased attention to confirmation preparation and Bible study.

### **High School Curriculum Framework**

Once approved and implemented, the High School Curriculum Framework developed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will affect cognitive efforts in both school and parish settings as new textbooks are developed and diocesan curriculum guidelines are adapted over the next few years. This framework provides a six-semester course of study (along with electives) that presents Scripture and church teaching in the light of a relationship with Jesus Christ. The course of study offers a suggested sequence for offering these courses, something currently lacking in the United States. The emphasis here is also on this point: The intended outcome of adolescent catechesis is to help young people develop a deep relationship with Christ and the church. - *editor*

## **Conclusion**

If the church is to meet the diverse needs of young people it must give adequate attention to each leg of the tripod at the school and parish level. As it looks to the future it faces challenges along with reasons for having great hope.

### *Challenges*

Both parishes and schools struggle to find the money to pay for quality programming. They also experience problems of getting ministries to collaborate and to overcome ecclesiological and theological differences among groups. Both face a shortage of personnel trained to work in all three aspects of the tripod. Both face administrations and supporters who do not understand the need for all three legs. Both struggle to find ways to actively engage parents in the process.

Despite these challenges, there are many reasons to be optimistic.

## *Hope for the Future*

The comprehensive ministerial approach set forth in *Renewing the Vision* acknowledges the diverse challenges facing adolescent catechesis. The formation of young people as disciples of Jesus now has the church's attention and the church has opened the doors wide and allowed for ingenuity and creativity in schools and parishes. Now there are multiple entry points to engage teens in life-long faith formation. The tripod model is taking root across the country and multi-faceted, interdependent processes of catechesis are being developed. The tripod model serves as a solid platform from which we can support young people in their evolving relationship with Jesus through the church.

Forming disciples may be more difficult today than it once seemed, but it is no less important or rewarding now than it was then. How we, as adults, engage, mentor, and inspire young people will have a significant impact on their faith journey. We must remember that faith is both caught and taught. Our institutions must attend to the dimensions of knowing, loving, and serving as equal components, and allot resources accordingly.

Parishes and schools each offer unique gifts and both are needed. If the church is to meet the significant challenges it faces in forming disciples of Jesus, greater collaboration between parishes and schools is required. Collaboration between school and parish leaders, who share their gifts, is the only viable approach to our catechetical mandate.

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