

Reflections on Parish and Adolescent Catechesis

By Michael Warren

This is the fifth article in a series on adolescent catechesis sponsored by the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis, a collaborative effort by NFCYM, NCCL and NCEA with support from USCCB, to enhance the quality of adolescent catechesis in parishes and schools.

Good pastoral practices lead to effective youth ministry and adolescent catechesis, but shoddy pastoral practices lead to ineffective ministry to, for and with young people

Youth ministers and others who are concerned with the contexts in which young people live are well aware that the lived life of the ecclesial communities (the churches) to which young people are connected (though they might not always attend their assemblies) play essential roles in the formation of adolescents. Where the life of the worshipping assembly is vital and actual, young people actively are invited to participate fully in the community and to live the Gospel. However, where that worship lacks vitality, the parish's efforts at youth ministry generally will struggle and young people will be reluctant to participate. It should come as no surprise then that good pastoral practices lead to effective youth ministry and adolescent catechesis or that shoddy pastoral practices lead to ineffective ministry to, for, and with young people.

My claim here is basically a sacramental claim. A sacrament is characterized by visible, tangible signs pointing to the presence of the spirit of Jesus. Sacraments enable us to see, feel, and experience the actions of the Holy Spirit. Where a congregation's life exhibits little vibrant gospel living—with all the uncomfortable questions that go along with that living—catechesis is doomed to become little more than lists of memorizeable tenets in floppy paperback books. Is it any wonder that young people flee such dull congregations?

I have developed this point more completely in much of my other work. Here, I simply make this important statement and ask for the reader's acceptance: When a congregation compromises the often-challenging teaching of Jesus to suit its middle-class sensibilities, making the parish into little more than a social club, ministry to youth loses its passion. A renewed youth ministry—and within it a renewed emphasis on adolescent catechesis—can not succeed without being tied to the ongoing struggle for Gospel vitality in the congregation. Based on these assumptions I offer these reflections.

1. Catechesis was originally meant to be an option but not a casual option. When and if it loses that optional character, it risks becoming inauthentic catechesis.

In today's post-industrial societies, schooling is not an option. The state enforces it. Neither is catechesis for young people. The option here is not whether the teen has a choice to participate or not; that is too casual a consideration. Rather, the challenge is for the youth minister, youth catechist, and high school teacher to allow room for the adolescent to choose to believe.

Choice is at the heart of catechesis. The process of catechesis originally was initiated by persons presenting themselves to the community and requesting to become Christians. They were accepted into the process of initiation only after an examination or scrutiny of their understanding of what they were doing and of their motives. They were warned that not everyone would accept the teaching of Jesus and agree to follow his way of life, and that the community would discern the spirit that motivated the one seeking membership in the community.

From the first, initiation was a step—and a highly tentative one for many seekers—to implicate oneself in the way of Jesus-faith. Not all seekers qualified for the waters of baptism. Augustine makes this point clearly in “The First Catechetical Instruction,”¹ his famous essay on dealing with seekers after baptism. Augustine explains that some (he mentioned shopkeepers, for example) might want to become Christian because it could be good for their business. Augustine argues that the person should be discouraged from being baptized for that reason alone. To repeat: The community's very first step was to examine motives. There was a discreet note of hesitation on the community's part, asking in effect, “Are you sure you know what you are asking for or getting yourself into?” I suggest that this character of catechesis needs to be taken more seriously when we consider catechizing adolescents.

Adolescents need to experience the invitational nature of exploring a deeper encounter with God. Catechesis begins when a person responds to God's grace. According to Augustine, persons are not shoved into catechesis, they are cautioned: shoving negates catechesis. Catechesis is an exercise of freedom and choice. The community says to the chooser, “We will be there with you and for you on your path toward becoming a seasoned disciple, to help you determine what it will take for you to become a disciple.”

Some readers certainly will be aware that past efforts at catechizing adolescents may have resembled “shoves” and thus lacked this character of choice, option, and (especially) caution. And some might also want to add, from their current perspective, a personal judgment: “And I needed to be shoved.”

Be that as it may, I find that many adults today express vigorous objections to the shoving they experienced as teenagers. They still resent what was “done unto them” (whether they wished it or not) in the name of catechesis. (My mother, for one, never forgave Mrs. O’Shea for the catechetical punishments she endured for not knowing catechism answers verbatim.) While Christian living is not an option for those wishing to be disciples, the process of catechesis itself never loses its character as a willing and self-involving process. Whenever it loses that character, it ceases to be catechesis.

This feature of catechesis—option—also raises questions about catechetical procedures in church-related schools. Vatican documents like the “General Directory for Catechesis” (1997) and “The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School” (1988) clearly distinguish the school as the zone of education in religion and catechesis as the zone of believers seeking nourishment.² (i.e., the pursuit of faith).

As a former secondary school teacher myself, I know one can find in students examples of all the following types: (1) Those who have not opted for schooling itself (even though it is mandated by the state and is compulsory under penalty of law); (2) those who have not opted for the particular church-related school (having been sent there by parents but against one's will); or (3) those who have not opted for the classes in religion (being desirous of the secular classes but resentful of the religious classes); or (4) those who have not opted for the distinctively Christian atmosphere (finding it distasteful on any number of grounds).³ Those who choose to attend the religious school because of its religious nature often seem to be in the minority of students. In such circumstances, competent teachers realize they cannot teach well without being aware of the varied agendas in a group.

A class about religion may be perceived by one person as deeply satisfying, while the person in an adjoining seat thinks the class a painful indoctrination and a third views it as a hateful religious exploitation. On the occasions when an event or activity has to be mandatory, those who understand the character of catechesis as option would seek to expand the number of ways that a person could be involved in the activities.⁴

Explaining in detail how this might be done would involve a separate essay. The general principle I recommend is for the teacher to respect all hesitations about religiousness, especially when honoring a mandate to teach about religion. As someone who teaches theology in a church-related university that requires students to complete a sequence of courses in theology and religion, I find there are ways of respecting students' hesitations about religious proposals while inviting them to reflect seriously on what it means to be a human person in today's world and the multiple kinds of relationships that a person may have.

After all, the Christian community's original hesitations about who might become members via the catechumenate were an authentic way of facing both the complexities of the human self and the community's own distinctive requirements. This concern over the possible abuse of educative power is not just an important educational matter, it is also an essential aspect of all pastoral work. The real problems occur when those who work with adolescents assume that their activity is beneficent or even beneficial for all in the group. Conscious doubt is the way to wise action in such a situation.

2. Catechesis is an initiation into a new sensibility, a new way of perceiving the world and of being in that world—in Greek terms, a distinctive *paideia*.

Catechesis holds to the Greek idea of *paideia*, with its inability to be communicated by schooling only. From the start, catechists knew one learned the ways of Jesus-faith by becoming a member of a group that embodied that faith. Life in the *ekklesia* was the means of communicating the secrets of Jesus-faith. In the historically well-documented fourth century North Africa catechumenate, moving into this alternate culture was not an overnight affair, but took about three years of difficult transition. It took time to come to see other persons as proxies of Jesus, and to see Jesus as God's covenant with the poor, and even more time to master the skills of the Jesus-Way. Tied to the new sensibility were habitual ways of responding to situations involving care for the sick, the imprisoned, the physically and

mentally impaired, the hungry, those lacking shelter—and also, those named as enemies. It was useless for the catechumen to claim these habitual ways of thinking and acting were in place; only actions could exhibit effectively these new ways of thinking and acting.⁵

Those admitted to the period of formation in the Jesus-Way did not proceed to baptism because they claimed to be followers but because they demonstrated the behaviors of discipleship after being coached in these behaviors by virtuosos who exhibited them. The believing, struggling, worshiping community, including the home as an active participant in that community, provides the locale for such behaviors. I doubt the school can be such a locale, except under very special circumstances, and parish programs of youth ministry cannot provide it unless intimately connected to the parish. The school is not the church, but a particular school's attention to the gifts in its midst and to the patient nurturing of those gifts can qualify it as a sign of the church. Those tempted to shove people into accepting Jesus, whether in the school or parish, indicates that they may well have lost confidence in the worshiping community's ability to display that sensibility in credible ways.

3. Catechesis is a lifelong process and the community is its agent.

The initiation process and eventual baptism were the start of a lifelong process whose chief agent was not any single person serving as catechist, but the vitality of the believing community itself. As Paul Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasize in the final third of their important book on the sociology of knowledge, conversion is no big deal; the big deal is the maintenance of the conversion, that is, of the new sensibility with its new perceptions and new ways of acting.⁶ The agent of conversion-maintenance is the community itself.

A variety of events and circumstances might prompt a person to move in a search for God. However, the process by which that same person becomes a faithful follower of the Jesus whom Christians name as the Christ does not occur by happenstance. Rather, this conversion takes place only through a carefully planned process—an achievement of intentionality on the part of both the seeking person and the welcoming community. I am dealing with a double intention here: one on the part of the seeker to become a disciple of Jesus and one on the part of the community to assist the seeker to become a disciple in reality. Of course it could happen—and often enough did—that the seeker might come to see the discipline of discipleship as too difficult and unsustainable and choose to abandon it.

The maintenance of conversion is not so much the task of any one individual but of the community of followers. This point is made over and over again in the 1997 “General Directory of Catechesis,” the most authoritative current statement about catechesis from Rome. Here are a few of its passages about the sacramentality of the community of believers.

#77 [T]he agent of catechesis [is] the church animated by the Holy Spirit.

#78 Catechesis is essentially an ecclesial act. The true subject of catechesis is the church which, continuing the mission of Jesus the Master and, therefore animated by the Holy Spirit, is sent to be the teacher of faith.... This transmission of the Gospel is a living act of ecclesial tradition.

#87 To fulfill its tasks, catechesis avails of two principal means: transmission of the Gospel message and experience of the Christian life.

#105 Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways.

We all need to pay closer attention to official church teaching.

4. The church is not perfect.

Another important factor to consider about adolescent catechesis is that the community of followers can tolerate the presence of those who have become uncertain of their way, those who have slipped back into old habits they themselves supposed they had left behind, or those who find the new way far more a burden than a joy. They may long for the old ways unobstructed by reminders of Jesus' teachings or the community's exhorted way. The community holds these persons lovingly in its circle because it is supposed to be a healing space for those at its perimeter—those who may even long to be free of it. In other words, the community is not a circle of "pure ones" but rather of those who are called to be more than their worst impulses. The community holds repentance as sacred and the possibilities of new efforts as a sign of God's presence. To be sure, some of the "uncertainties" listed above can and do characterize adolescents, and at certain crisis moment, the struggles of some church leaders themselves.

In other words, adolescent catechesis works to create the best disciples it can, given the situation in which it works. We should not hold them accountable to different standards or expect them to be perfect in an imperfect faith-community.

This reality should not be used as an excuse for doing little. Instead, it is the reason why those who work with young people should take the formation of young people into disciples so seriously.

5. Humanization must be at the heart of today's adolescent catechesis.

The power of today's communications media to shape our worldview and values according to the interests of consumerism is alarming to many of us. We conclude that any strengthening of family and religious cultures is an important antidote to the ever-rushed sensibility of more profit, more comfort, more privacy. In my view the church and its catechesis, indeed all social institutions, should foster humanization: the ability to recognize our fellow beings as equal creatures of God. This ability, when successfully instilled in children and adolescents and maintained into adulthood, represents a sensibility that is deeply attuned to the human, to what fosters the *humanum* and what diminishes it. The stakes of consumerization-or-humanization are what confront all of us for the future. When catechesis does well what it is intended to do, the world is oriented toward healing and away from destruction. This is an option that can grasp the imagination of today's youths.

Disciples in Training

Today's young disciples are "in training" (if you will) to be the adult disciples of Christ. How we invite them to choose discipleship, teach them the Christian way to perceive and be in the world, and help them to begin a lifelong process of formation in and with a faith community which itself is not always perfect should be an essential focus for our ministry of catechesis to, for, and with adolescents.

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Footnotes

1. Augustine, *The First Catechetical Instruction* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1966), trans. Joseph P. Christopher. The Latin name for this treatise is, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, loosely translated: "About Catechizing Those with Little Knowledge."
2. See Congregation for Catholic Education, "The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School," *Origins* 18:14 (September 15, 1988): 213/215-228.
3. Important research on the influence of church schools on students has been done by Leslie J. Francis and Josephine Egan. Their research shows the greatest predictor of the growth of religious consciousness and faith from such schooling to be the faith-filled practice of the parents. See, Leslie J. Francis and Josephine Egan, "The Catholic School as 'Faith Community,'" in M. Warren, ed., *The Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, V.2 (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 1997), pp. 291-305.
4. Of course it is true that no learning is possible without the cooperation of the person being educated. Teaching is in part a work of creating among learners the conditions for the achievement of the educational goals, which include the willing, self-involving participation of the learner in the process. An insightful and entertaining book about the various problems encountered in teaching about religion is Chris Arthur, *Biting the Bullet: Some Personal Reflections on Religious Education* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1990). See his wise observations about teaching about ritual, "The Mimicry of Faith," pp. 10-15. This book should be more widely known and read.
5. The early Christian teacher, Origen, wrote "When it becomes evident that the disciples are purified by the word and have begun, as far as possible, to live better, only then are they invited to know our mysteries." (C. Cels. 3,59) This quotation is found in C. Capelle, "L'Introduction du catechumenat a Rome," *Recherches de theologie ancienne et medievale* 5 (1933) p. 151, note 38.
6. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1966), Chapter 3: "Society as Subjective Reality," pp. 129-183. The actual quote: "To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. This is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure of the new reality." P. 158.