Hope For A Future Church

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Will There Be Faith?
A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples
By Thomas H. Groome
HarperOne. 368p $15.99

After nearly a half-century teaching religion, I found myself turning page after page of this fine book, saying—sometimes even aloud—“At last! Someone who really understands!” Thomas Groome realizes that in communication, no matter what the form, the crucial element is not the speaker, nor even the validity of message, but the audience. If the message is ignored, or even scorned, the fault is with the speaker, who has yet to find a method to connect meaningfully with the intended beneficiaries—like selling hockey skates to Bedouins.

As a theology professor in Boston College’s Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, with lifelong, hands-on experience reaching young people, Groome sees that the problem isn’t with the “what” (the obvious essentials of the faith) or even with the “how” (the catechetical methods a canny teacher uses to capture their attention). The innermost core of the religious education problem is the “why”: How do we convince our young audience that the Gospel message is even worth bothering about? Why should they value forgiveness and resurrection when (1) guilt trips are bad for you and (2) their own deaths are so remote as to be unreal? He asks, will there be faith? Will our overprotected, overstimulated young find Christianity worth apprehending, owning and carrying into the future? That is a sobering—and very real—question.

Groome sums up the present “faith” of the audience, who could be the next generation of believers, as “moralistic therapeutic deism.” They accept—as they were brainwashed to do—“a purely self-sufficient humanism” in which “people no longer have sins, but ‘issues.’” What’s more, they have not objectively more important, but surely more pressing concerns than connecting with some invisible God in a visibly imperfect church: SAT’s, looks, popularity, wrestling practice, single-parent homes, sex. And he acknowledges—as few do—that Christianity is a “lifelong journey of conversion,” which does not fade away with the final diploma. If celebrants and participants in parish liturgies are lackluster, it is foolish to believe the next generation will be attracted by their lethargy.

Unlike the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the bishops’ new Framework for High School Catechetics, Groome’s answer is completely down-to-earth, experiential, practical: From life to faith and back to life. Start where the audience is, their real-life preconceptions, priorities, prejudices. Teach as Jesus did, from the bottom up, not from the top down. From the very first moment, find a
focusing event to engage their attention, a concrete life-situation or a puzzlement that can lead toward the Scripture or doctrine. I offer an example:

Can you remember a time when someone was cruel to you? Tell us about it. How did it feel, in your gut? Now flip that: Have you ever done something casually cruel yourself? Were you aware the same pain was going on inside your victim? Now, in Matthew 25 Jesus says the only question God uses to judge our lives is by how kind we were to those we scorned. As Jesus said to the lawyer who provoked the parable of the Good Samaritan, “Go and do likewise.”

Genuine learning begins with honest curiosity, or it is already so much easily forgettable chaff. Do not offer them answers before the question itself is intriguing. The General Directory for Catechesis insists that the one receiving instruction “must be an active subject, conscious and co-responsible, and not merely a silent and passive recipient” (No. 167). They should be trained not as sheep but as discerners, critical thinkers who become able to solve most quandaries without running to “the priest.” All these insights are so obvious it is a wonder they are so rare.

The author not only develops a solidly reasoned theory for forming disciples, but each segment offers five concrete, practical strategies to engage families, schools and parishes with a generation baptized but as yet unconverted. Such concrete, specific schemes came to Groome not from theological research but from face-to-face grappling with the daunting challenge of offering salvation to those unaware they need it. Who needs God when you have a cellphone? And unlike other attempts to direct that effort, Groome aims not for encyclopedic breadth of doctrine, but sincere depth of personal conviction in both the instructors and in the instructed—not just conformity, but conversion.

In order for all the worthy catechetical attempts by the church to have a chance, every religious education director in the country—in fact, anyone with serious hope for the future of the Catholic faith in America—needs this book. Urgently.

William J. O’Malley, S.J., most recently published The Wow Factor: Bringing the Catholic Faith to Life (Orbis) and On Your Mark: Reading Scripture Without a Teacher (Liturgical Press).