

**Transcript Segment, Part 3**  
**“Toward a Meaningful Life”**

**Presented by Theresa A. O’Keefe, PhD**

Then the question becomes, well, what do you do about faith formation? You know, this is a topic. Adolescence and faith formation. Some people might say, well this is the hardest population to deal with. And the reason that it's the harder population to deal with is because they're not children anymore and you can't just say, "Here, here are the answers, study them and pass the test." Or even if you're not even sure there is a test, like, "I'm not sure."

But anyway, the point is that adolescents, because they are potentially inquiring, they put a whole different spin, even if they're inquiring about the worth of religious education. So the first thing that we have to deal with, though, is, I mean, really? Religious education in this day and age? Oh, come on. First of all, nobody's here.

So Pew Research indicates that more and more people are not showing up in more and more religious places. What's interesting to me that, in the research-- that's this year, 2018-- they're suggesting that 32% of Massachusetts residents will describe themselves as "nones," meaning people who have no religious affiliation. Now I wasn't expecting you to read all that fine print on there, but that's an important thing for us to pay attention to and it makes it much more challenging.

The other part of that is, among Catholics, is this quote number two there, item number two, "Catholicism has experienced a greater net loss due to religious switching than any other religious tradition in the U.S." Now you start with the fact that it's a very large religious community in the U.S. so it has opportunity to lose more people, and so the Pew Research indicates for us that 34% of Massachusetts residents identify as Catholic. So only 2% more than identify as "nones." That's significant. And Massachusetts is one of the most Catholic states in the country. It's only really surpassed by Rhode Island, which is about 41%. So here we are with the largest concentration of Catholics-- one of the largest concentrations of the Catholics in the country.

So what are we going to do and why is this the case? And the largest decline happens among adolescents and emerging adulthood, which is later adolescence in my book. So it happens anywhere between the ages of 13 and 22 is the biggest drop-off. Why?

Well one, I'd suggest, is because they outgrow God. They outgrow the image of God that they have in their head. Image via Gary Larsen. This concept of God is some guy in the heavens who does stuff is no longer helpful.

Christian Smith in his book *Soul Searching* that he published in 2005, he came to name this image of God that he found among some adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 years

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old was what he called "moralistic therapeutic deism." And basically, some other people have called it "God the Butler."

He's there when I need him-- and he's always a he-- he's there when I need him, but if I don't need him, he's not here. I don't have to worry about him. He's not going to demand anything of me. You know, he just lets me get on with my life, otherwise. But if I need something, I can call on him and he probably should do something helpful. But he's not at all demanding. Well how could he be demanding? His job is to help me, not to be demanding of me.

So this image of God, I suggest, is also a very childish image of God. And what's unfortunate for us is that we haven't done much work to replace it with anything more robust and appropriate for an adult. And so that's really the challenge of us and in the Church. But that's also largely more of a cultural reality, too, because-- and this is a New York Times article that was in the paper just the other day that this author is bemoaning the fact that it's harder to talk about God because the culture-- even though we call ourselves a Christian country-- in the culture, people don't even know what these words mean anymore.

So when he talks about sin and kindness and grace, people are like, "I don't know what that's about." And redemption and salvation. So we've lost a parlance with the Christian language in a way that people can make sense of it in a deep and rich sort of way. So there's a lot that contributes to it.

And let's not forget this. Oh, yeah. The fact that we have had this significant exposure of a crisis of sexual abuse of children and others by the clergy and the cover of the clergy has been extraordinarily damaging for the Church and its membership but also for the faith of individuals. We know it here first in 2001, 2002 when it came out here in Boston, and we're just getting in a lovely, huge renewal this year.

So it makes it really challenging to even talk about faith formation. And many of you, I expect, have had the experience of people asking you, "Why would you go to church? Are you nuts? What's that all about?"

And those of you who are in religious leadership know it firsthand. You have spent a lot of time trying to talk to the people about why you do, which means you also spend a lot of time talking to yourself saying, "Why do I? Why do I?"

There's a couple of dangers here. One is the constant risk of conflating. And this is a thing I want you to pay attention to in your work, that sometimes we conflate faith in the Church with faith in God. They are not the same thing. For children, they can be. They can assume that faith in the Church is also faith in God.

And the other thing that's really important is to pay attention to, that our image of God isn't God. So as funny as Gary Larsen's image of God is-- you might say, "Yeah, that's kind of funny"-- you have to always check yourself and say, "God is always bigger than what I'm thinking." And an adolescent doesn't know that unless someone's told them. Most adults don't know that unless someone's told them. Let me tell you: God is bigger than your image of God, no matter how lovely that image may be.

And the Church is to serve the community's ever-expanding faith in God. That means we always have to be kind of pushing the boundaries on what it is we think we believe about

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the one we call God. And very often, that Church, throughout history, has failed miserably in doing that work. And I think this is one of those moments.

One of the things we have to pay attention to when we're talking about the Church and about faith is that the Church is not a membership organization like so many others. It isn't simply trying to get members, even to do good work. I mean, it's not simply a good works organization. It's not saying, "How can I get people to join the ranks, pay the bills, keep the lights on. How can we get people to join us?" It's not that.

You have to have a community of people, but its first work is not that. Its first work is to be a community of belief. And what I mean by that is it offers a horizon about what life is about. How often, though, do you hear that spoken about in any kind of setting, right? A community of belief that's offering a meaningful horizon-- an ultimate horizon about what life is really about.

The term "horizon" is used in philosophical and theological sources to talk about what's ultimate. And I have a quote here from Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher, who says, "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. On the other hand, to have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby, but being able to see beyond it. A person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small."

Like the young adolescent who's just looking out of the boat and realizing there's a world outside the boat, they're only just beginning to perhaps appreciate that life is about something. That life is for something. When you identify a horizon, then life gains a direction, life gains a meaning, and everything gets prioritized in light of it.

Whatever we consider is ultimate, then, makes sense of everything else. So whether that everything else is your job, your family, what's happening today, all of that gets oriented relative to this ultimate horizon. And when you fail to have a horizon, you're buffeted by whatever's immediate, without any sense of orientation to what's most important in your life.

To have meaning and purpose in life, I suggest, is about having some sense of ultimate horizon. Some sense of something great out there. Something meaningful. Something purposeful.

So what is a meaningful life? The Christian tradition offers a horizon, but we don't often think of it that way when we're saying things like the Nicene Creed. This is-- I don't know if you can see that that well, but those of you who are familiar with saying this on a regular basis, this is the first stanza of the Nicene Creed. "We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, Of all things visible and invisible."

It's been with the Church since the fourth century, and we just might think, well that's just some kind of odd code we say somewhere during the Mass. I'm not even quite sure if I thought about it too long. I'd probably get confused. I'm sure it's antiquated and whatever.

But what this statement, this stanza, is saying, is that all life, everything we see, this Church believes, comes from one Source. Everything-- me, you, the furniture, the air we're

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breathing, our likes, everything-- everything comes from one Source. So what? That means-- and this one Source, we believe, makes everything in love and is expanding constantly. What does that mean?

It also means, then, that we believe that that creation that we're living in is not ultimately in conflict with itself. That everything here, that everything that we can imagine, is never outside the consideration and power of God. Not you, not me, not nasty people, nothing. Nothing is outside God. You cannot get outside that which is making you.

So the Church believes that everything comes from one thing and returns to that one thing and all of that happens with the power of love-- this thing we call love. Edward Hahnenberg writes in his book, *Awakening Vocation*, "The infinite horizon of the human person is nothing less than the mystery of God. What grounds our knowing, as well as our choosing and our loving, is neither an unending emptiness nor absolute being. It is the God of Jesus Christ. God is the horizon that opens up the landscape and encircles our lives, calling us forward even as it constantly recedes before us."

We can never capture the whole of it. We can never figure it all out. And it's not mystery because we haven't figured it out yet, it's Mystery in that where did this all come from anyway? What are we doing here? The fact that there is life is itself Mystery.

And in this, from a religious perspective, we're not talking about the mechanics of it. We're not talking about Big Bang theory or anything else. We're talking about that it is; that we're living; that we're breathing; that there's anything to even talk about. What's that all about? And the Christian tradition says: it's about the God who seems to have made it all, and we can only know that God through our experience of what God has offered us in the knowing. So it will always be beyond us because we are creatures. We are not the Creator of it all.

So then, what do you do with that life? If that's the thing-- if all life came from one thing and it supposedly isn't in competition with itself, although it might seem otherwise, what does that mean? How are we to live? And this is where we're grounded in the Greatest Commandment.

And so I'm using the Gospel of Mark here. "One of the scribes asked him, which is the first of the commandments? And Jesus replied, the first is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There are no other commandments greater than these."

So this is the first order of business of life. It's not like, I'll take care of that when I get everything else done-- after I get the kids in bed, after I get my job taken care of, after I've dealt with the millions of obligations that I have. Then, I will get to loving my neighbor, but first, I've got real work to do. That's real life and I don't know what this religious stuff is, but I'll do it when I've got time.

Christian Tradition is saying, no, the first thing we do and the last thing we do and everything else that we do in between is love. And if we do it, life goes well. Doesn't mean it's easy, doesn't mean people don't die, doesn't mean people don't get hurt. No, it doesn't mean any of those things. What it means is that when we love, life is better, and when we fail to love-- when we are more self-interested, self-serving, self-grabbing-- people get hurt. Lots of people get hurt.

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I was sharing with somebody who's in the room a couple of weeks ago, "You never hear people suffering from PTSD for love." Humans are made in love and for love. We're made to be this way, and that's why when people are loved, they just kind of blossom and they give it out. They become generous in themselves.

However, when they have suffered from trauma or ongoing fear or threat, they get smaller, they shrink, they hurt, they live in pain. That to me is one of the things that proves to them to be true: that people thrive in love. This world seems to have been made in love and for love. And so I'd suggest to you, that's the horizon that the Christian tradition offers.

But identifying that horizon is not arrival. Just because I can know it doesn't mean I've gotten there, and as we've said before, you never get to a horizon. It's always still moving in front of you. And also what's important in this horizon is how you sail there, right? How do I get there? I actually have to live in love in order to arrive at that place of love.