

C21 Resources

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Growing Faith for a Vibrant Church

Growing in Faith: The Journey of a Lifetime

BY JANE E. REGAN

Picking up my youngest daughter from kindergarten at our local Catholic school one spring afternoon several years back, I experienced one of those moments that shifted, even just slightly, my understanding and appreciation of our faith.

Once released from the dismissal line, Catie dashed to the car with an art paper in her hand, clearly excited.

“I know what this Sunday is!” she announced as she jumped in.

“Really?” I responded, only half paying attention as I pulled out of the school parking lot.

“Yep,” she said. “It’s pom-pom Sunday.”

“You mean Palm Sunday,” I corrected.

“No, pom-pom Sunday because all the followers of Jesus cheered for him on his way to Jerusalem. And he got to ride a pony!”

Sure enough, the picture that she showed me when we got home was of Jesus sitting on a pony/donkey with all the people standing along the side of the road waving red and yellow pom-poms, vestiges of the maroon and gold pom-poms she’d gotten at a BC women’s basketball game, no doubt.

I was right, of course, it was Palm Sunday. But Catie was right as well in that she caught the essence of that event. From that day forward, I have entered into the celebration of Palm Sunday with a renewed appreciation for the energy and vitality of that day. This has made the events of Holy Week more poignant

and the celebration of Easter more triumphant. My own growing in faith often happens in simple interchanges like this one with my daughter.

Faith Beyond Belief

To speak about faith we need to consider two interrelated realities. The first is the “faith which we believe”; this can often be summed up by terms like “Church teaching” or “the tradition.” At the conclusion of the profession of faith in the Rite of Baptism are the words: “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord.” When we use faith in this sense, we are referring to the statements or propositions that give expression to our deepest commitments about the nature of God and God’s relationship with human beings. Here the word *faith* is interchangeable with *beliefs*.

The other meaning of faith comes into play when we speak of “a person of deep faith.” Here we refer not to beliefs alone, but to the perspective a person has on God, self, and others. Faith in this sense points to a way of life or a way of seeing and being in the world. Often when we refer to a growing or developing faith, this is the sense of faith we mean. To attend to faith in this sense, we need to examine the various dynamics that enhance our knowledge and understanding of the faith (as beliefs) as well as the power of faith (as way of life) to influence, shape, and direct our lives. And an exploration of those dynamics is the topic of the next two issues of *C21 Resources*—*Growing in Faith: The Journey*

of a Lifetime. This issue gives particular focus to the process of fostering faith in children and adolescents; the spring 2010 issue looks at the faith of young adults and adults.

Setting the Context

The end of the twentieth century marked a number of significant shifts in the way that we think about and engage in the process of growing in faith. These reflected the vision embodied in the writing of Vatican Council II and by the social, cultural, and ecclesial factors that influenced those who convened in Rome for the Council’s deliberation each autumn from 1962 through 1965. It is beyond this essay to even briefly examine the theological and pastoral themes of Vatican II; my aim here is simply to name two of

the significant theological/ecclesiological shifts that are constitutive to the vision and writings of the Council and then to draw out the implications for fostering faith.

Role of Human Experience in “Knowing” God

The renewal in theology that was taking place during the middle decades of the twentieth century served as a foundation for deliberations at the Council. Of particular influence were the writings of Karl Rahner, S.J., especially his understanding of revelation. Simply put, the question is this: How do we come to know God? On the one hand, we can speak of knowing God in cognitive, often propositional terms. Here the focus is on divinely revealed truths that are conveyed through scripture and tradition. While this



Dr. James P. McIntyre, senior vice president at BC, daughter Kara McIntyre Hardiman, BC '94, granddaughter Julia McIntyre Hardiman (daughter of Kara).

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Growing Faith

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is an essential component of a contemporary understanding of revelation, to focus exclusively on this leads to a narrowing of the scope of God's revealing action to only what can be put into words. On the other hand, we can speak of knowing God through our human experience—through creation, through relationships, through being human in the world. There are dangers in overemphasizing this dimension of revelation as well; a believer's personal experience of God needs always to be interpreted through the lens of the understanding of God's presence as testified to in scripture and tradition. Developing from the writings of Vatican II has come a renewed recognition of the complementarity of these two dimensions of revelation, and a re-appreciation of the human dimension that has, at times in our history, been neglected.

Within religious education theory, this has meant an integration of the lives and experiences of the learners into the dynamics of faith formation. Most approaches to catechesis today give careful attention to the experience of the learner. This is done not merely because it serves as a helpful and interesting point of entry for the learners and an effective way to get their attention. We draw on lived experience because we believe that it is in those experiences that the presence of God is revealed to us.

In this issue, the essay by Ann Garrido draws on this understanding by looking at the foundational insights of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Kathy Hendricks highlights the importance of the experience of family in how children and adults come to know God. The revelatory nature of human experience is also key to the model of faith formation of children with autism that Susan Swanson examines in her essay. Examining this issue from another direction, Theresa O'Keefe reviews research that has been done with adolescents and the relationship between their experience and faith.

The Church as People of God

A second key theme from Vatican Council II is our understanding of church.

Whatever designation we use—people of God, body of Christ, community of disciples, etc.—the underlying theme is the same: the church is first and foremost the gathering of the baptized. To speak of church as the documents of Vatican II do is to begin with the common call of baptism and from there look to the various roles that support each of us as members and all of us as a community in living out ever more clearly that shared vocation as disciples. This understanding of church has also brought a renewed vision of the

“We believe it is in the lived experience that the presence of God is revealed to us.”

role of the laity and the call to live as people of faith. While membership in the church and participation in parish activities is a key element of Christian living, there is also the renewed sense of the role of lay persons in bringing Gospel vision and values to the social and cultural context. More than ever, there is the recognition that we are active in our parishes for liturgy and community not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world; we are gathered to be sent.

One of the clearest implications of this in the parish context is the emphasis on approaches to faith formation that is life-long and parish-wide. For many people, the dominant understanding of religious education or catechesis has been limited to working with children and youth. While such work is always necessary, there is a growing recognition of the importance of setting that expression of faith formation into the broader context of a faith-filled and vibrant community. Thomas Groome's essay on the need for total community catechesis sets this vision out clearly. Complementing that are the articles by John Roberto who looks at the impact of family religious activities on children and youth and the one by Dorothy Bass that examines the role of Christian practices that both shape and express our faith on a day-to-day basis. Adding depth to the discussion is the

article by Hosffman Ospino in which he examines the role of popular Catholicism in fostering faith.

Growing Faith

That term—growing faith—can be taken a couple of different ways. On the one hand, we can take the word *growing* to describe faith. This calls to mind the dynamic and developing nature of faith. A person with faith that is growing or maturing is more and more able to address the challenges of life. She has a level of ownership of her faith and incorporates her beliefs and values in her life decisions. (The essay “Faith of a Lifetime” explores this.)

“Growing faith” can also refer to a task—like growing tomatoes or prize orchids. From our gardens we know that living things grow well only with attention and care. The same is true of faith. All members of the faith community—and particularly parents and grandparents, teachers and catechists—have the responsibility to nurture the faith of children and youth. In doing so, we create the kinds of vibrant parish communities that cultivate and sustain their faith and ours.

For Further Reading

Recent writings that examine the theology and impact of Vatican Council II include John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), which provides a helpful chronology of the council and an analysis of the central themes; John Baldovin, *Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), which traces out the genuine contribution of Vatican II to the liturgical life of the Church; and Richard Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum (Rediscovering Vatican II)* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), which focuses on the documents on ecclesiology.

Endnotes

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CHILDREN'S STORIES FOR FAMILY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAITH AND GOD

RECOMMENDED BY LELAND NAGEL

All of these authors/illustrators have many more books that you might find offer insights into values we cherish. Each of these books opens the door; you decide how far you will venture into this journey to the soul.

Demi, *The Empty Pot*. New York, NY, (Henry Holt and Company, Inc.: 1990).

Thoughtfulness, hard work, and honesty are portrayed as virtues in this competition. What is prized becomes the source of discussion and of what one values. Demi's art always has a touch of gold.

Fox, Mem, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Brooklyn, NY & LaJolla, CA, (Kane/Miller Book Publishers: 1985).

What is used to help one remember also deepens the relationship between the generations. The artwork of Julie Vivas captures the warmth and intimacy of the story.

Lopez, Barry, *Crow and Weasel*. San Francisco, CA, (North Point Press: 1990).

It's a quest from boyhood to manhood, from adolescence to maturity and it encounters all the questions that confront us on the journey and offers answers to what's most important in life.

Mains, David and Karen, *Tales of the Kingdom*. Elgin, IL, (David C. Cook Publishing Co.: 1983).

This is the back door entrance into God's kingdom. It's a great adventure and introduction to "Thy kingdom come." It keeps asking and answering

the question, What does one serve the King?

Muth, Jon J., *The Three Questions*, based on a story by Leo Tolstoy. New York, NY, (Scholastic Press: 2002).

This offers an answer to the question, What does it take to be a good person? Most people are familiar with at least one of Tolstoy's short stories; this theme is foundational to all of them.

Polacco, Patricia, *The Keeping Quilt*. New York, NY, (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division: 1998).

Most of Patricia's stories are true and this is no exception. It is a combination of tradition and memory kept alive at the important events in a family's celebrations.

Contributing Publications

America, the national Catholic weekly magazine, has been published since 1909 by Jesuits in the United States for thinking Catholics and those who want to know what Catholics are thinking. *America* is online at www.americamagazine.org. Subscribe via the Web or call 1-800-627-9533.

The Journal of Religion, Disability & Health provides an interfaith, interdisciplinary forum that supports people with disabilities and their families through religious, spiritual, clinical, educational, and scientific perspectives. This journal addresses the critical ethical, moral, and spiritual issues raised by people with disabilities in health and rehabilitation services. It focuses on research, policies, and practices that unite religious personnel with health care professionals and researchers to develop more holistic supports and inclusive communities for people with disabilities. Subscribe online at www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306952~tab=subscribe~db=all.

Lifelong Faith, designed for pastors, church staff, and faith formation leadership, provides thought and practice in Christian lifelong faith formation in churches and homes. Each issue focuses on a particular aspect of lifelong faith formation and includes major articles by national experts, book reviews, and practical strategies and program models that can enrich leadership and enhance faith formation. For more information, visit www.lifelongfaith.com/journal.htm or call 203-729-2953.

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Practicing Our Faith.org is a Website by the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a project whose purpose is to develop resources to help contemporary people live the Christian faith with vitality and integrity in changing times. The Project is ecumenical in orientation and appreciative of the legacies of a range of Christian traditions. The Project sponsors seminars, books, conferences, and Websites for adults and youth. Email to info@practicingourfaith.com.

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Handing On the Faith

The Need for Total Community Catechesis

A burgeoning recognition that the process of growing in faith extends far beyond the confines of formal religious education has given rise to a call for an approach to catechesis that draws on the whole life of the Christian community as a source and agent of formation. No longer is the task of fostering faith the work of “the experts”; all are called to be participants as teachers and learners.

BY THOMAS H. GROOME

Stop and remember how you came into your identity in Christian faith. I’ll wager that memories will come tumbling of family rituals, prayers, and faith sharing, of parish events and celebrations, and of personal relationships that spoke to you of God’s love and presence in your life. Well, what was often achieved in a former time by osmosis—from the Christian enculturation of family, community, and parish—is now being organized into an intentional approach to “handing on the faith.” And given the diversity of influences in this post-modern time, such enculturation cannot be taken for granted; it needs to be organized. The good news is that there’s a great movement to do so.

As yet, there is no agreed upon name for it, but my favorite is *total community catechesis* (hereafter, sometimes TCC). In essence, it engages and deepens the potential of the total life of a parish and the whole ethos and lifestyle of the family to educate in faith. Its programs forge a coalition between family and parish, heightening catechetical consciousness and lending the resources for both to educate in faith through every aspect of their shared lives. Programmatically, TCC creates a working relationship between catechesis and liturgy, correlating the catechetical curriculum with the Sunday lectionary and liturgical year, and encouraging active participation by families in sabbath worship. In the final analysis, *total community catechesis*

is broader than any particular program; through it, I believe the Holy Spirit is inviting the Church to renewed catechetical consciousness and practice. It is imperative that we take this spark and fan it to flame.

A Paradigm Shift: Beyond “School” to Community

Total community catechesis is an idea whose time has come—again. There was a time when catechesis was done more by socialization than by schooling, when family and parish formed a “lifestyle enclave” with the ethos needed to



Photo courtesy of BC Office of Marketing Communications

effectively nurture people in Christian identity. There is an old African proverb that “it takes a village” to raise a child. Though the “village” has largely disappeared from this post-modern culture, we still need to craft a Christian one to raise Christian children.

Many times I’ve begun a workshop with the question, What kind of a family or community does it take to raise a French person? And follow with, Or Polish, or Irish, or English person? Participants are nigh insulted by such an inane question and its patently obvious answer. But then I ask, What kind of family and community are needed to raise a Christian person? Now a central

insight of the social sciences—that identity formation is by socialization and inculturation—becomes compelling for Christian catechesis as well.

Of course, this is to presume that Christian faith is a total affair, that it pertains to people’s whole “being”—as noun and verb, who they are and how they live. Indeed, this was one of the great gifts of Vatican II—to return us to a total sense of Christian faith. Karl Rahner made the point that when the Church emphasized faith as cognitive knowledge and assent to official teachings, a question and answer catechism

seemed catechetically sufficient, encouraging a memorized summary of what Catholics should believe. Of course, that old catechism was more often surrounded by a Christian “village” than in contemporary society.

The Council, however, returned us to faith as cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Faith is about our beliefs indeed, but also our spirituality and ethic; our faith calls us to orthodoxy as well. Like its greatest commandment, Christian faith requires us to invest our whole mind, heart, and strength (see Mark 12:28-33). Or to echo that question in many of the old catechisms: Why did God make you? And they gave

a great answer: “to know, to love, and to serve.” Christian faith demands our total life, engaging our heads, hearts, and hands. To become well informed, formed and transformed (lifelong conversion) in such faith requires total community catechesis.

TCC calls for a huge paradigm shift; I summarize it as “beyond school to community.” I immediately emphasize that reaching “beyond” school does not mean to leave it behind. The problem is that the Western world now automatically thinks “school” when we envision education of any kind. This is a relatively recent development, with a story beyond our space here. Suffice it to say that we no longer think of the community and family as primary loci of education; we confine education to school of some kind.

For education in faith, the Church, too, invests most heavily in the schooling paradigm—parochial schools and Sunday schools (or whatever they may be called). TCC should include good schooling in Christian faith but it calls us to think family and parish first, allowing community to define our catechetical consciousness and way of proceeding.

Within a paradigm shift “beyond school to community,” TCC calls us to imagine beyond teachers and taught, to communities teaching and learning together; beyond instruction in religious knowledge to informing, forming, and transforming persons and communities in the wisdom of Christian faith; beyond didaction to conversation; beyond children-centered to every person and the whole family/parish in “permanent catechesis.”

In practice, TCC calls families, parishes, and all formal catechetical programs to intentionally craft every aspect of their communal life to nurture and enhance people’s lives in faith. It calls for a coalition of parish, family,

and school/program, engaging every member and all aspects of each in sharing and nurturing faith together.

Every “Ministry” to Catechize

Implementing TCC requires us to engage the catechetical potential of the total life of the family and the parish, and to have effective formal programs that give family and parish the resources to intentionally catechize. One schema I’ve found helpful toward practical implementation of TCC is to imagine how all the Christian ministries can be done with a catechetical consciousness—in both parish and family. In other words, let us continue doing catechesis as a ministry of the word—its typical designation—but also engage the catechetical potential of the other ministries of the Church as well.

Since the first communities, the Church has described its core ministries as: *koinonia*, demanding that it be a community of living witness to Christian faith; *leitourgia*, requiring the public work to worship God together; *diakonia*, fulfilled by care for people’s physical and spiritual welfare; and *kerygma* that requires evangelizing, preaching, and teaching God’s Word of revelation that comes through scripture and tradition. So, we can summarize the Church’s core ministries as *witness*, *worship*, *welfare*, and *Word*. Let’s imagine every parish, family, and school/program as fulfilling each of the four—as appropriate to their context—and doing so *with a catechetical consciousness*.

The Total “Family” as Catechist

Beyond the two-parent ideal, “family” must include extended and blended

families, and single-, double-, and triple-parent families; in fact, *any bonded network of domestic life* can function as a family for faith education. Vatican II reiterated that “parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children.”

Vatican II also reclaimed an ancient image of the family as “the domestic church” (*Constitution on the Church*, 11). If we take this seriously, then, in its own way, the family should participate in all of the Church’s ministries, and, for TCC, do so with a catechetical consciousness.

*“Imagine all the
Christian ministries
done with a catechetical
consciousness—in both
parish and family.”*

Family as community of Christian witness requires that the total life of the home be suffused with the values and perspectives of Christian faith. The members must constantly review the family’s environment and ethos, lifestyle and priorities, relationships and gender roles, modes of discipline and accountability to each other, language patterns and conversations, work and recreation—every aspect—to monitor how well it reflects the convictions and commitments of Christian faith. Everything about the Christian family should bear witness to its faith; this is how it catechizes.

Family as community of worship calls it to integrate shared prayer, sacred symbols, and ritual into its patterns of daily life. For TCC, every Christian family needs its home liturgy to symbolize and celebrate, nurture and sustain its faith. I once asked an observant Jewish friend how she came by her strong Jewish identity. She immediately responded, “Oh, from the rituals in my home.” Surely every Christian family can create or rediscover sacred rituals for the home that will nurture the Christian identity of its members. Family prayer—morning, night, grace—along with sacred rituals and symbol is essential for the home to nurture in faith. A family can also participate in the liturgy of the parish by reflecting together on what they heard from the readings or sermon; homes can have symbols or rituals that celebrate the liturgical seasons (Advent wreaths, Christmas cribs, Lenten fasts), and more.

Family as community of human welfare requires it to care for the spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being of its own members, rippling outward toward others in need and serving the common good of society. Family life must reflect love and compassion toward all, promoting justice within and without. If children grow up and adults dwell within a family that tries to live the social values of God’s reign, it will surely hand on this “constitutive” aspect of Christian faith effectively. A school or program can teach about justice, but people will be much more likely to live justly and commit to justice for all if they experience as much in their own families.

Family as community of God’s Word calls members to share their faith around scripture and tradition, among themselves and in the broader

community. Parishes must help parents—with resources, training, suggestions, support, encouragement, expectation—to integrate attention to God’s Word into the patterns and conversations of family life. Every catechetical program must be crafted around partnership with parents, and provide them with the resources to be actively involved in the formal catechesis of their children. Modern parents are admirably intent to teach even the youngest children their numbers, alphabet, days of the week, and so on. Why not be equally proactive, and from an early age, in handing on the language and symbols of faith?

The Total Parish as Catechist

Traditionally, a parish understands its formal programs of catechesis within its ministry of the *word*. But the whole life of a parish and all of its other ministries are its *implicit* curriculum—at least as significant as the *explicit* one. The key is for a parish to become conscious of how its whole life can educate for Christian faith; it must intentionally craft all of its ministries to maximize their catechetical potential.

Parish as community of witness: a parish should reflect the Good News it proclaims, and be readily identifiable as a Christian community of faith, hope, and love. Members must constantly ask: Does the life of this parish—its worship, shared prayer, and care of souls; its community ethos, modes of participation, and structures; its human services, outreach, and social values; its preaching, catechesis, and sharing faith programs—does everything about

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GROWING IN FAITH

I was in the fifth grade in a Catholic school when the fruits of Vatican II began to appear in the Mass’s liturgical music. I remember the energetic, joy-filled strumming of the guitar players as they sang spirited songs such as “To Be Alive” and “We Are One in the Spirit.”

The melody, rhythm, and lyrics of these songs connected my bodily-felt senses, emotions, and thoughts as I experienced God in ways that transcended the earnest but remote nature of our daily religion classes. Singing these songs within the communal settings of my

elementary school friends, church, and family allowed me to realize that I could pray through music. As a high schooler, I joined our church folk group and began to lead our parish community in song. I experienced tremendous joy sharing this part of myself within these

communal contexts. These experiences had a significant influence on my faith as I learned what it meant to be sacrament for one another.

— Susan Swanson

Family Matters in Faith Formation

This article examines the literature on family faith practices and their implications for fostering faith within the family and the parish. The research studies we have consulted explored family faith practice among religiously committed families. These studies will help us answer these questions: How does family religious involvement benefit children, teens, and adults, and strengthen the family? What is the impact of parental faith on children and teens? What are the core family faith practices?

BY JOHN ROBERTO

A good deal of research and our own experience makes clear that the family is the first community of faith and the most powerful influence on the faith of children and teenagers. Parents are the first educators of their children, providing the foundation for a spiritual and religious life.

At the same time, families are stretched and stressed in new and challenging ways, putting new demands on family life and parish ministry. Family time and shared family activities, such as the daily meal, have suffered because of work demands, busy schedules, and a rise in individual activities. And there is a decline in family religious practice at home and participation in the life of the parish. Busy schedules often push religious activities— at home or in church—off the calendar.

This article examines the literature on family faith practices and their implications for fostering faith within

the family and the parish. The research studies we have consulted explored family faith practice among religiously committed families. These studies will help us answer the following questions.

How does family religious involvement benefit children, teens, and adults, and strengthen the family?

What is the impact of parental faith on children and teens?

What are the core family faith practices?

1. How does family religious involvement benefit children, teens, and adults, and strengthen the family?

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that a family's religious involvement directly benefits children, teens, and adults in a variety of very significant ways. In their survey of the research literature, David Dollahite and Jennifer Thatcher found the following benefits of a family's religious involvement:

- Divorce rates are lower and marital satisfaction and quality scores highest among religiously involved couples.
- Religious practices are linked with family satisfaction, closer father-child, and closer parent-child relationships.
- There is less domestic violence among more religious couples,

and religious parents are less likely to abuse or yell at their children.

- Greater religiosity in parents and youth is associated with a variety of protective factors for adolescents. Adolescent religiosity is inversely related with many high-risk behaviors, all of which have potential to greatly influence the adolescents' current and future family relationships.

They conclude, "Since many studies now show the beneficial consequences of religious belief, practice, and community support on health, mental health, and relationships, it appears that one of the most important things parents can do for their children is spiritual and religious experience and community" (Dollahite and Thatcher, 10).

The Effective Christian Education Study by the Search Institute found that family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity.

Of the two strongest connections to faith maturity, family religiousness is slightly more important than lifetime exposure to Christian education. The particular family experiences that are most tied to greater faith maturity are the frequency with which an adolescent talked with mother and father about faith, the frequency of family devotions, and the frequency with which parents and children together were involved in efforts, formal or informal, to help other

people. Each of these family experiences is more powerful than frequency with which an adolescent sees his or her parents engage in religious behavior like church attendance (Benson and Eklin, 38).

Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are *three* times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and *twice* as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith.

Families that express faith also have an impact on participation in church life and service activities. Twice as many youth in families that express faith are involved in a church youth group, go to church programs or events that include children and adults, go to church camp or work camp, and regard a religious faith as a very or most important influence in life. Their attendance at worship services is almost 20 percent higher than youth from families that never express faith.

It is evident that youth who are most likely to mature in faith are those raised in homes where faith is part of the normal ebb and flow of family life. Religious practices in the home virtually *double* the probability of a congregation's youth entering into the life and mission of Christ's church.

James Davidson and his colleagues have conducted research on Catholic generations every six years since 1987. In their 1997 book, *The Search for Common*

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Ground, they confirmed that the factor with the most impact on Catholics' religious beliefs and practices is childhood religiosity. "By childhood religiosity we mean the extent to which youngsters are subjectively and behaviorally involved in the Church. Subjective involvement refers to the salience they attach to religion (i.e., religion's importance in their lives). Behavioral involvement points to their participation in devotional activities such as prayer, and public rituals such as attendance at Mass."

Davidson and his colleagues identified the following influences of childhood religiosity:

- Childhood religiosity affects closeness to God. The more people learn to be religious as children, the more likely they are to report experiences of the holy later in life.
- Childhood religiosity also fosters commitment to the Church. Catholics who learn to be religious when they are young find it relatively easy to claim their Catholic identity. They also come to appreciate the benefits of being Catholic.
- The more children participate in religious activities and develop a sense that religion is an important part of their lives, the more they are likely to have close personal relationships with God later in life and the more they are likely to learn about major developments such as Vatican II, both of which foster adherence to Church teaching.
- The two most important influences on childhood religiosity are having parents who talked about religion and having religious educators and catechists who are effective in ministry. It seems that remaining active in one's childhood church is more attractive to those with strong family connections. Davidson and his colleagues

conclude that if church leaders want to shape Catholics' views of faith and morals, they need to pay special attention to influences that take place very early in people's lives.

2. What is the impact of parental faith on children and teens?

One of the most significant and startling findings in the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) is the impact of parental faith and religiosity on the beliefs and practices of teenagers. Christian Smith writes, "Parents for whom religious faith is quite important are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is quite important, while parents whose faith is not important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important. The fit is not perfect. None of this is guaranteed or determined, and sometimes, in specific instances, things turn out otherwise. But the overall positive association is clear" (Smith, 57). Specifically, NSYR found:

- Of parents who report that their faith is extremely important in their daily lives, 67 percent of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is not important in their lives.
- Of parents for whom faith is somewhat important in their daily lives, 61 percent of their teens also report that faith is somewhat or not at all important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is extremely important in their lives.
- Of parents for whom faith is not at all important, 47 percent of their teens also report that religious faith is not at all important or not very important in their lives; only 2 percent report that faith is extremely important in their lives.

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear. Smith concludes by saying:

"Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that *the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents*. Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives....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. Parents and other adults most likely 'will get what they are.' This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both. But it is a fact worth taking seriously in any case" (Smith, 261).

"A family's religious involvement directly benefits children, teens, and adults."

"The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities" (Smith, 267).

3. What are the core family faith practices?

Research and pastoral practice point to a number of significant family faith practices that, consistently acted upon at home and nurtured and supported by congregations, would contribute to building families of faithful Christians and strengthening faith in daily life. In our review of research studies, we have seen a number of recurring themes. While each study used different language, there are a number of core

family faith practices that appear in each study.

David Anderson and Paul Hill in *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* summarize much of the research on family faith practices in Four Keys: caring conversation, devotions, service, and rituals and traditions. To these Four Keys we will add one more family faith practice: the family meal.

As you read and utilize these insights, be sure to recognize that there is one overriding theme that is woven through all of the research: *the integration of faith and daily family life*. To quote Diana Garland, "the daily activities of family life are the canvas for experiencing and sharing their faith life with one another."

Core Practice 1: Family Faith Conversations

Christian values and faith are passed on to the next generation through supportive conversation. Listening and responding to the daily concerns of family members make it easier to have meaningful conversations regarding the love of God. Hearing their parents "faith stories" is one of the most important influences on the faith of children and teenagers. "Caring conversations include more than simply telling our stories. At the heart of the communication recommended here is the sharing of faith, values, and the care of others. This can range from supportive listening, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with another, and simple praise and thanksgiving to challenging admonition, ethical discussions, and call to action on behalf of God's creatures and creation....The story of Jesus and our life stories are woven together as one fabric that brings forth endless variety of caring conversation" (Anderson and Hill, 112-113).

Core Practice 2: Liturgy, Family Devotions and Prayer

The Christian faith shapes the whole of our lives and involves a lifetime of study, reflection, and prayer. Family devotions

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Family Matters...

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and learning provide a way to learn more about scripture and Christian tradition as a family, and apply the teachings to daily life as a follower of Jesus Christ. "...A devotional life is essentially a way of living in the world connected to the saving

GROWING IN FAITH

I come from a big family where Catholic religious practices were woven through the fabric of our lives. However, one of the most formative experiences was not explicitly religious, but shaped my faith: eating dinner as a family on a nightly basis. My siblings and I were involved with the various extracurricular activities that many families know. Likewise, my parents had their commitments outside the house. However, it was an expectation that everyone would be home for dinner.

It was in that space that I learned many valuable lessons: how to wait my turn, how to listen to others, and how to tell a story that would hold the attention of ten listeners. But it also taught me patience, restraint, and understanding. As I reflect back, it was where I learned to live out Jesus' command (Matthew 5: 23-24) — if you are angry with your brother, "go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come" to the table. By meeting daily in that time and space, I learned the necessity and practice of reconciliation, for you can't sit elbow to elbow and remain angry. The inevitability of the daily encounter called for a move toward peace.

— Theresa O'Keefe

work and message of Jesus Christ, the intersection between the eternal and the mundane in a way that personalizes God's saving work and word. But one's devotional life is always connected to the larger body of Christ. This understanding of a devotional life includes, but is not limited to, public worship, bedtime prayers, Bible reading and study, table grace, evening and morning prayers, and praying alone at any time of the day or night. All of these occasions are opportunities for the word of God to be 'at work in you believers' (1 Thessalonians 2:13)" (Anderson and Hill, 134).

Core Practice 3: Family Service

Engaging in service with one's family can be a powerful opportunity for growing in faith. Both children and adults are more likely to have a growing, strong faith when their family serves others together. "When parent and child/teen together perform service activities, the child/teen sees the parent's capability, faith, and values in action. The cross-generational bond takes place not only in the service event, but also in the retelling of the event through the years...Most significantly, service is not merely a once a month outing...Service is the day-in and day-out lifestyle we lead that manifests the faith in us and involves our children in the faith. Parents and families can engage in this key every day" (Anderson and Hill, 151-152).

Core Practice 4: Family Rituals and Traditions

Families identify themselves and tell their family stories through daily routines, celebrations, and rituals. Rituals and traditions are those patterns of behavior that occur with regularity. They communicate meaning, values, and relationships that exist between people and with God (including God's created universe). Family rituals take many forms, from daily rituals such as mealtime, bedtime, leaving and returning; celebrations such as birthdays, anniversaries, and special achievements; church year rituals at home such as Advent and Lent; and milestones such as births and deaths, first day of school and graduations, etc. Family rituals and

traditions speak volumes about what the family values, believes, and promotes, and how much the family values its faith. "Family rituals and tradition serve as a repository that preserves much of a family's history, beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams...All families, indeed all communities, have ritual words, gestures, actions, and traditions that are repeated periodically. The challenge for the church is to help families more consciously and meaningfully participate in these significant rituals and traditions" (Anderson and Hill, 163).

Core Practice 5: Family Meal

Research has been accumulating that demonstrates how eating together as a family five or more times a week is strongly linked to lower incidence of bad outcomes, such as teenage drug and alcohol use, and to good qualities like emotional stability, low levels of family stress, and good parent-child/teen relationships. Regularly eating together supports family members in staying more connected to their extended family, ethnic heritage, and community of faith. The things family members discuss at the supper table anchor children and teens more firmly in the world. The research is clear: regular family meals have a very positive impact on the family and its individual members. Good things can happen when family members gather together to eat.

So many of the family's faith practices happen around the family meal: having conversations, praying, reading the Bible, and celebrating rituals and traditions, to

name a few. The family meal is one of the few rituals that allow families to act out their concern for each other, and their need and desire to be together. The family meal is the time when family comes first, establishing, enjoying, and maintaining ties. Just as a meal was central to the ministry of Jesus, the family meal can be a central faith experience for family members, and the family as whole. It is a daily opportunity to discover Jesus' presence in the midst of family life.

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What Is a Christian Practice?

The process of growing in faith has more to do with how we live than what we are taught. Focused attention to the “practices” that shape the Christian life provides access to an important resource for growing faith.

BY DOROTHY BASS

Christian practices are shared patterns of activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Woven together, they form a way of life. Each practice is a complex set of acts, words, and images that addresses one area of fundamental human need. Hospitality. Sabbath-keeping. Forgiveness. Making music.

First of all, practices are things we do. A child or adult can participate in a practice such as hospitality through warm acts of welcome, even without comprehending the biblical stories and theological convictions that encourage and undergird this practice. Most of our practicing takes place at this unreflective level, as we go about our daily living.

At the same time, practices are not *only* behaviors. They are meaning-full. It is important to note that within a practice, thinking and doing are inextricably knit together. Those who offer hospitality come to know themselves, others, and God in a different way, and they develop virtues and dispositions that are consistent with this practice. When people participate in a practice, they are *embodying* a specific kind of wisdom about what it means to be a human being under God, even if they could not readily articulate this wisdom in words.

While affirming the unreflective character of most participation in practices, I believe that it is also helpful to reflect in the light of our faith on the shape and character of the practices that make up our way of life. Indeed, such

reflection may be especially important at this point in history, when the shape of our lives is changing so rapidly. These are practices in which Christian communities have engaged over the years and across many cultures—practices which it is now our responsibility to receive and reshape in lively ways in our own time and place.

When we do reflect on practices such as those explored in *Practicing Our Faith*, we can see that central themes of Christian theology are integrally related to each Christian practice: our practices are shaped by our beliefs, and our beliefs arise from and take on meaning within our practices. For example, Stephanie Paulsell bases her chapter and book on “Honoring the Body” on the theological convictions that God created human bodies and declared that they are good; that God shared our physical condition in the incarnation of Jesus; and that God overcame death through Christ’s resurrection. Through everyday activities—for example, resting, bathing, and caring for those who suffer—we live out our deepest convictions about who we are as embodied children of God in specific, often stumbling, ways. We learn to do so from those with whom we share our lives, and likewise, it is with them that we need to reflect on practices as they take shape in the light of and in response to God’s grace.

A practice is small enough that it can be identified and discussed as one element within an entire way of life. But a practice is also big enough to appear in many different spheres of life. For example, the Christian practice of hospitality has dimensions that emerge as (1) a matter of public policy; (2) something you do at home with friends, family, and guests; (3) a radical path of discipleship; (4) part of the liturgy; (5) a movement of the innermost self toward or away from others; (6) a theme in Christian theology; and probably much else. Thinking about this one practice can help us make connections across spheres of life—connections that often

get disrupted in our fragmented society. For example, reflection on the Christian practice of hospitality would provide a way of exploring the relations between spirituality and social justice.

Note that our concept of practices describes a larger chunk of life than most uses of this term imply. For example, we would not call tithing a practice; rather, it would be one discipline within the larger practice of household economics. Notice that each of the practices (keeping sabbath, honoring the body, hospitality, discernment) necessarily leads to the others; in fact, you can tell when you are doing one well when it necessarily involves you in the others. For example, if you are practicing hospitality so intensely that you neglect sabbath and don’t honor your body, your practice of hospitality is misshapen.

*“Christian practices...
woven together, form
a way of life.”*

Is worship a practice? Yes. However, it is important to note that worship is an overarching master practice rather than one practice among many. The term “worship” has a double meaning: it is what we do together in church (as we speak, sing, listen, and gesture, *embodying* the wisdom of Christian faith in a specific form), and it is the purpose of the entire Christian life. Bringing these two meanings into right relation requires us to ask questions like these: How does the way we worship together form us to engage in Christian practices in other contexts? And how can our participation in practices beyond our worship services also be offered up as worship to God?

Some would call the sacraments “practices.” However, in Valparaiso Project literature we have seen the sacraments as more normative and all-

encompassing than any given practice can be. Craig Dykstra and I put it this way in our essay in *Practicing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

At its heart, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices. In this rite, the grace to which the Christian life is a response is fully and finally presented, visibly, tangibly, and in words. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, sabbath keeping and community shaping, and all the others. Unlike each particular practice, baptism does not address a specific need; instead, it ritually sketches the contours of a whole new life, within which all human needs and ways of living can be perceived in a different way. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives, but we can know, in a knowing beyond words, that God’s creativity overcame the darkness that covered the face of the deep at earth’s beginning, and that water flowed from Jesus’ side on the cross, and that the new creation to which we now belong anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs are not just met; they are transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, and the true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace. “In baptism,” said St. Francis, “we have already died the only death that matters.”

Why does all this matter? How does this idea of “practices” help us think about—and live—the Christian life? It points beyond the individualism of the dominant culture to disclose the social (i.e., shared) quality of our lives, and especially the social quality of Christian life, theology,

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Christian Practice

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and spirituality. Our thinking and living take place in relation to God and also to one another, to others around the world and across the centuries, and to a vast communion of saints. I remember a line that got cut from *Practicing Our Faith*: “This is not a self-help book but a mutual-help book.”

It helps us to understand our continuity with the Christian tradition—an important matter during this time of change and in the midst of a culture infatuated with what is new. The way of life we are describing is historically rooted. Practices endure over time (though their specific moves have changed in the past and will surely change again). This perspective can help contemporary people to treasure their continuity with the past. Continuity is not the same as captivity, however. Caring for a *living* tradition means encouraging adaptation and inventiveness within ever-changing circumstances. Moreover, the history from which Christian practices emerge is expansive, encompassing many cultures and denominational traditions.

It makes us think about who we truly are as the created and newly created children of God. An important claim is that Christian practices address “fundamental human needs.” We live in a culture that is very confused about what people need—a culture where “needs” are constructed and marketed. In contrast, awareness of Christian practices helps us to reflect theologically on who people really are and what we really need. (Our vulnerability and our strength are disclosed in the practice of honoring the body, our finitude, and gratitude in the practice of keeping sabbath, etc.)

All of this means that people need to *craft* the specific forms each practice

can take within their own social and historical circumstances. This approach thus requires attention to the concrete and down-to-earth quality of the Christian life. It invites attention to details such as gestures and the role of material things. This crafting is an important responsibility of ministers and educators.

All people engage in most or all of the practices in *Practicing Our Faith* in one way or another. After all, all human beings necessarily rest, encounter strangers, help one another to find healing, and so on. However, those who embrace Christian practices engage in these fundamentally human

activities in the light of God’s presence and in response to God’s grace as it is known in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Christian practices can be understood not as tasks but as gifts. Within these practices, we do not aim to achieve mastery (e.g., over time, strangers, death, nature) but rather to cultivate openness and responsiveness to others, to the created world, and to God.

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Endnotes

DOROTHY C. BASS is Director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith (www.practicingourfaith.org), a Lilly Endowment project based at Valparaiso University that develops resources to help contemporary people live the Christian faith with vitality and integrity in changing times. Her most recent book, coedited with Craig Dykstra, is *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*. She is also working with a team of authors to write a book on Christian practices addressed to emerging adults.

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”
— Galatians 3:26

Faith for a Lifetime

A number of theologians and religious education theorists have given attention to the way in which a person’s faith grows or changes over time. While not separate from knowledge of beliefs or church teachings, this sense of a growing faith looks at the way in which persons make meaning of the world around them through their commitments of trust and belief.

BY JANE E. REGAN

The following description gives an overview of faith development, highlighting the dynamics that enhance and shape our faith as we move from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

Faith in Our Parents

The earliest experiences of infancy serve as an essential foundation for a life of faith. Psychologist Erik Erikson describes this as the time in which basic trust is established. The consistent response an infant receives when it cries serves to reassure the child that the world and the people in the world can be trusted to address her needs; the world becomes a trustworthy place to be. Erikson and others writing about this period of development point out that it is in our experience of caring parents that we first experience the one who transcends us, an experience that serves as a foundation for our relationship with God.

Faith of Our Family

With the acquisition of language (about the age of two or so), the child begins to take on the images and stories

that are meaningful to the adults around her. Living in a context where fact and fantasy, experience and imagery are seamlessly woven together, the child has not yet developed the cognitive capacity to sort and understand the world around her; she looks to her parents for the source of meaning and coherency.

At this point in a growing faith, the visible faith of adults—particularly parents—is important. When church documents say that the parents are the first educators in faith of their children, this is where it begins. Not with what we say but in the rituals, actions, and attitudes that shape family life. The way in which God is spoken about in the family plays a significant role in shaping the image of God a child begins to create at this age. Over time, the child takes on the stories, beliefs, and customs of the community

because they are held as important within the family; this serves as the transition to the next expression of faith.

Faith within Our Community

As the child moves into school age, she begins to be a participant in the larger context of parish, school, and various groups and teams. Her point of reference for making sense of the world around her expands beyond the family to the communities that are important to her. In the beginning, these generally parallel those that her family hold as important; over time this often changes. By about the age of twelve or thirteen, her primary orientation for faith has shifted from parents to this larger community.

Key to this style of faith is a sense of belonging. This faith is often referred to as “conventional faith”; the person’s identity

and relationship to the church are defined by the group. Characteristic of early adolescence is the position: “I know who I am by the groups I belong to.” With this is the conviction that other people can be defined and understood by the groups to which they belong as well. Since people reflecting this mode of faith understand right beliefs and right actions based on the authority of their association group, actions or attitudes that might appear to be signs of a crisis of faith might simply be evidence of a shift in group affiliation. For example, a high school senior who is spending time with kids who are members of a youth group in another denomination might talk glowingly of this other fellowship while making disparaging comments about his own parish or his church’s teachings. This isn’t inherently a “crisis of faith”; it may simply be the normal process of trying on various identities and understandings of faith.

One final important comment before moving on to the discussion of the next faith expression: research has shown that this style of faith rooted in the faith of the community begins in early adolescence and can continue right into adulthood. This mode of faith, rooted in the understanding of the role of community and authority learned in childhood and adolescence, can be adequate for an adult’s entire life. A person’s sense of allegiance and willingness to adhere to the authority of a particular group becomes increasingly sophisticated over time; the faith expression of a forty-year-old is seldom the same as that of a fourteen-year-old. The allegiance to authority can move from parish or parish leader to a wider and broader understanding of church and reflect a growing ability to recognize what is essential to this group and what is not. However, when an adult begins to perceive contradictions between valued authority sources or encounters experience that leads to critical reflection on how her beliefs and values are formed, she is primed for movement to the next style of faith.

Faith Apart from Our Community

This style of faith can begin to surface when the young adult leaves home, either figuratively or literally. As she comes into

a clearer sense of her own agency and responsibility for self-definition, she also comes to recognize tensions between group identity and individuality. As she struggles with the relationship between self-fulfillment and the expectations of others, she begins to create a coherent system of belief that is based on individual reflection. Identity is no longer in terms of a group; rather than relying on the group to define her beliefs and identity, the person expressing this mode of faith comes to a sense of her own values and beliefs and then participates in groups that share her vision.

It is important to note here that an adult reflective of this mode of faith may give primacy to her own articulated beliefs and values but is still shaped by the beliefs and values of childhood. We never create a belief system on our own; it is also in dialogue with our past experiences and our present cultural and psycho-social context.

Like the prior stage of faith, this faith expression can serve a person throughout adulthood. Those who are researching adult and young adult faith today speak of “seeking faith” as a descriptor that is more and more present in our faith communities.

Faith from and for Our Community

Connected with the psychological and social shifts that define mid-life, this mode of faith involves a circling back to reinterpret and reintegrate aspects from earlier stages. The sense that one can clearly and independently define beliefs and values is brought into question in the face of the ambiguity and “messiness” of life. To live faithfully in the face of the disappointments, redirections, and limitations of human existence, the person reflective of this mode of faith has the capacity to live in “committed relativism.” He says, “I know that my knowledge and capacity to authentically live out my beliefs and values are always only partial. Other people, other traditions also express dimensions of what we might refer to as ‘truth.’ And yet, I can commit myself to faithful adherence to the truth as I see it, knowing that it is always partial and provisional.”

Key characteristics that mark this stage include: a capacity to live comfortably with pluralism and ambiguity; a renewed and clarified self-knowledge and an ability to accurately and sensitively take the perspective of others; and a commitment to one’s own tradition while maintaining openness to the insights of other faith stances and traditions.

Insights for a Growing Faith

This brief overview of the characteristics of various faith modes gives us some helpful insights into the process of growing in faith as it comes to expression in ourselves or in others. Three points are worth considering:

The dynamics of faith are never static. We can never say we have arrived at fully mature faith; we are simply moving in that direction. While it is impossible (and imprudent) to label people’s faith experience according to their stage or style, having a sense of the movement of a growing faith helps us to be sensitive to and supportive of the faith movements of those around us.

Growing or maturing in faith is much more than learning more facts or understanding church teaching more clearly, though those are important.

To foster our own faith development and to enhance the faith growth of others involves a willingness to engage in reflection and conversation about that which is of ultimate concern for us. It is in conversation with ourselves, with one another, and with God that we can further a living and life-giving faith that can sustain us for a lifetime.

Further Reading

One of the earliest and still influential theorists on faith development theory is James Fowler. He sets out the results of his research in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1981). His subsequent writings began to draw out the implications of the dynamics of faith growth for how we live out our Christian vocation in contemporary culture. See *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges*

of *Postmodern Life* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996). Another voice that describes the way that we grow in faith is John Westerhoff (*Will Our Children Have Faith?* New York, Seabury Press, 1976). Although published over thirty years ago, his description of the realities of faith formation and his prescription for effectively supporting a growing faith is still helpful and insightful.

GROWING IN FAITH

Curiosity caught my eye as a seven-year-old child when my parents and I walked by our neighborhood church and saw dozens of kids singing, clapping, and getting ready for the Sunday children’s Mass. They looked very excited! I told my mom that I wanted to join them. Every week, Fr. Carlos and a group of catechists gathered an hour before Mass outside the church with children from the parish to share faith stories, play games, and learn songs. This was not part of the regular catechetical meetings. It was a preparation for the liturgy and an opportunity to spend time with a great priest, some generous catechists, and other children. I truly enjoyed the combination of learning and fun. Church definitely took on a whole new meaning, something that pleased my parents very much. On Sundays, they did not have to tell me to get ready for church; I already was! I am not sure what exactly made the trick, whether being with other children or knowing that some people walked the extra mile to make God truly accessible to me as a child—I think the latter. In time, I became an altar server, a youth ministry leader, a catechist, a religion teacher, and today a theologian.

— Hosffman Ospino

The Faith of a Child

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an important expression of the best in catechesis for children—rooted in the tradition, attentive to the learner, embodied in ritual. How might this approach to catechesis give us all insights into the way in which children, youth, and adults grow in faith?

BY ANN GARRIDO

Few catechists in this country could have predicted the popularity of a religious education movement called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. “In 1985, I sent a personal Christmas card to everyone in the United States who was involved in CGS,” Tina Lillig, director of the National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, told me. “I think I needed 23 stamps. Last month we sent out our annual mailing to 1,400 association members, and we estimate that there are an additional 900 or so people who are actively working in CGS.” As national director for 13 years, Lillig has seen interest steadily grow and spread, but nothing prepared her for the present. “Now we are receiving inquiries from dioceses as far away as the Philippines, Tanzania, and Pakistan,” she says. “Suddenly it is something of a wildfire.”

The Historical Evolution

What is surprising is that the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is nothing new. It was founded over 50 years ago in Rome, in the shadow of the Vatican, by two Italian laywomen. The first, Sofia Cavalletti, was a bookish scholar with a penchant for ancient languages who completed a doctorate in Hebrew and comparative Semitic languages at La Sapienza University in Rome. After the Second Vatican Council, she participated in the commission on Jewish-Christian relations. A single woman, Cavalletti had no children of her own and was not particularly interested in the spiritual life of children until pressed by a friend

to prepare her child for first sacraments. Moved by the child’s interest and insight, Cavalletti became fascinated by the religious potential of children and ways to nurture it within the church.

She found a colleague for her quest in Gianna Gobbi, a former assistant to Maria Montessori. Gobbi introduced Cavalletti to the pedagogical research of Montessori and the methods and approach she used early in the 20th century. Gobbi brought a deep knowledge of children and their developmental capacities to Cavalletti’s extensive theological foundation. Together, the two formed a dynamic partnership that lasted almost half a century. In



The Good Shepherd statue outside St. John’s Seminary Chapel, Brighton, in memory of Reverend Robert Flagg.

Cavalletti’s home near the Piazza Navona in Rome, the women created what they called an atrium. In early church architecture, an atrium was a gathering place between the liturgical space of the church and the street. It was a space where the faithful recollected themselves before entering into worship and where catechumens received instruction in the faith as part of their initiation into the Christian community. Cavalletti and Gobbi understood their atrium to serve a similar purpose; it was not to be a children’s church separate from the adult church, but rather an aid to the fuller participation of children in the liturgical

and communal life of the one church that includes baptized Christians of all ages.

Fashioned after a Montessori educational environment, the atrium included hands-on materials that children could use: small models of various objects they would see inside the church, dioramas and figures to accompany the scripture readings, prayer cards, maps of ancient Israel, timelines of the history of salvation, and resources for further study of scripture and liturgy. When introducing any materials, the women would always listen to the children’s responses and observe how they used them. The women discarded materials that did

not provoke either intense reflection or individual work among the children. Those that did, they kept. Over time, by watching children’s consistent attraction to certain materials, Cavalletti and Gobbi began to discern a unique tenor to the children’s understanding of the Gospel, particular themes that captured their attention, and ways of expressing the themes that were particular to childhood.

In the early 1960s, Cavalletti first began to write about what she and Gobbi were seeing. Her observations became widespread internationally after she

published *The Religious Potential of the Child* in 1979. Atria were established in a number of countries, including Mexico, Colombia, Canada, and the United States. A bishop in Mexico with whom Cavalletti corresponded gave the movement its name (Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) because of the distinctive image of Christ to which the youngest children were consistently attracted across numerous cultures.

Initially, atria in the United States—as elsewhere—emerged within the Montessori educational community, especially Catholic Montessori schools. Within a short period of time, however, parishes, traditional schools, and communities of parents who were home-schooling their children began to seek training in this approach to religious formation. In 1984, the newly formed National Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd began to offer catechist formation courses. Since 1997, when the association first developed a computerized database, 820 courses have been offered. A conservative estimate of participants counts around 10,000, but the number is probably much greater. Most catechists have been trained to work with 3- to 6-year-old children, but many have gone on to complete further levels of training, allowing them to create and facilitate atria for 6- to 9-year-olds and 9- to 12-year-olds. It is very difficult to determine the number of children currently participating in atria across the country, but judging from membership and mailing list data, Lillig estimates it to be well over 20,000.

Distinguishing Characteristics

The following five characteristics distinguish Catechesis of the Good Shepherd from traditional religious education:

Theology of the Child. Grounded in Montessori’s pedagogy, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd perceives the child not as a “tabula rasa” ready to be instructed about God, but rather as

Photo courtesy of BC Office of Marketing Communications

someone who already has a deep relationship with God. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd thus provides the language and space to help this relationship grow. The catechesis begins with the belief that the child has been given the Holy Spirit in baptism and that the Spirit will drive the child toward what he or she most needs. As a result, the children's questions and interests have guided the development of the atria curricula, rather than what adults think children should learn.

Role of the Adult. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd invites the adult to move out of the role of teacher and serve instead as a co-listener and co-learner with the child before the Word of God. The adult functions in a role similar to that of a spiritual director, listening carefully to each child's needs and questions and matching that child with resources from the faith tradition that will best serve the child's spiritual journey at this time. The adult is like a matchmaker who wants to encourage the child to get to know God better. So the adult creates a place and time for them to meet and fall in love, but then backs away so that the two can encounter each other on their own terms.

Attention to the Environment. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd places a special priority on the space in which religious formation takes place. Maria Montessori observed that young children have "absorbent minds," meaning that they learn language, culture and even religious belief largely through the process of osmosis or "absorbing" what is around them rather than through lessons and lectures. If children's experience of the Spirit or "Inner Teacher" drives them toward what they need to grow, the environment around the children can be understood as the "Outer Teacher"; it can help them meet those needs or it can stifle them. Unlike traditional religious education, CGS emphasizes the atrium environment in which formation takes place. It is purposely structured not as a classroom, but a place in which the spiritual life can be lived.

Spiral Methodology. Whereas traditional religious education often dedicates each

year to a different theme (e.g., second grade is dedicated to reconciliation and Eucharist, sixth grade to Old Testament), Catechesis of the Good Shepherd employs a spiral approach in which core themes are touched on every year, expanding what has been covered previously. These five themes—incarnation, the kingdom of God, the paschal mystery, baptism, and Eucharist—first introduced to a child at age 3, provide an overarching structure to which all further study is linked. This promotes integration among various areas of Christian life.

Emphasis on Essentials. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd notes that one of the greatest gifts children bring to the church is their capacity to winnow through a vast Christian tradition and discern what is most essential and what is most important to hold on to. Cavalletti observed that children quickly become restless when they are given peripheral material, but concentrate and settle down when given what they are hungering for. CGS seeks to remove from catechesis all that is extraneous. It seeks to use the fewest words possible, rid itself of "busy work," and introduce only themes that children, over time, have indicated meet the criteria of what is essential.

Assessing the Gifts and Challenges

While these five characteristics distinguish Catechesis of the Good Shepherd from other religious education programs currently in use, such distinctiveness has brought both blessings and challenges to the schools and parishes that use the Good Shepherd approach. At the top of the list of blessings is the fact that most pastors, catechists, and parents involved with CGS find it exceedingly worthwhile and effective. In the midst of strong critiques of religious education in the decades since Vatican II, this catechesis has received acclaim for both its theological substance and its careful attention to the developmental capacities of the child. While more rigorous assessment of CGS and its long-range impact are currently needed, widespread anecdotal evidence indicates that children in the program are active, engaged

members of their Christian communities and articulate about their faith. Another positive outcome is the increased engagement of adults with their faith as a result of CGS formation courses. Adults who participate in the three levels of catechist training discover that their own faith is greatly enhanced in the process. Even though not all course participants will go on to serve as catechists in atria, they report in course evaluations that the courses are personally enriching and helpful for other forms of ministry in which they are engaged (such as leading the adult catechumenate, Catholic adult education, or serving in social outreach). Furthermore, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can bridge divides within the church; it appeals widely to liberals and conservatives among Catholics and other Christian traditions. Participants in the formation courses include members of Opus Dei and the Catholic charismatic community, as well as Mennonites and Lutherans; approximately a third of the atria in the United States are hosted within Episcopal communities.

At the same time, the energy involved in this approach to catechesis has created great strain in many communities. To be effective and meaningful, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has several requirements that many parishes and schools find almost impossible to sustain: atrium space, enough trained catechists, and time. Many parishes and schools are simply short on space and find it difficult to dedicate space specifically to this purpose.

As to catechist training, each level of catechesis requires approximately 90 to 100 hours of training, plus additional time for creating atrium materials, observing in other atria, and processing notes from the course. It can be difficult to find enough volunteers willing to invest that amount of time in their ministry, especially if they are active parents or work full time. Time is also required for the children: a two-hour atrium period each week that allows the children to receive a new presentation and also to work with materials that have already been presented to them. Many parishes and schools are accustomed to

a 45- to 60-minute block and find it very difficult to change. Such expectations can create tensions with other groups in the community that must compete for space and time. Parishes and schools attracted to the method are often unsure of how to implement it fully and how it ought to relate to other religious education programs that may be running concurrently.

Another emerging challenge is the relationship between Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the local diocese. As CGS becomes more widespread, dioceses are taking note of it and asking how the curriculum matches diocesan standards. Since CGS is based on an oral tradition and uses no textbook, diocesan offices and, indeed, the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism, have found it difficult to evaluate. It does not fit into any of the categories to which they are accustomed. As a result, communication is a challenge as a charismatic, organic movement merges with established ecclesial structures and policies.



DeAnne Parks, *Feed My Lambs*, 2009. To see additional works by this artist, please visit her web site at www.artdeanne.com

"These are issues that we haven't had to address before, when we were a much smaller movement set primarily

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Fertile Ground

Growing Faith in the Family

Nurturing faith within the family is about attending to the rituals and stories that give expression to the family's faith and tradition. Being conscious of connecting those with the rituals and stories of the Catholic tradition contributes significantly to the growing faith of the whole family.

BY KATHY HENDRICKS

I was in fifth grade when I wrote my autobiography. Needless to say, it was brief. I described my home, my parents and five siblings, our family gatherings, and the summer vacations we took together. Decades later, I wrote a “life-line” and a spiritual autobiography for courses in graduate school and spiritual direction certification. In both, I referred to my fifth-grade experience as a

starting point in the process. It affirmed and acknowledged the stories that were seeded in my childhood.

As a young mother, I spent hours reading to my two children about places like Narnia and Oz. Sometimes, however, they wanted a story closer to home and entreated me to tell one of my own. I was not good at inventing stories so I veered toward ones about my childhood. Much to my surprise, the topic intrigued them. They no doubt felt our lives touch when they could picture me as someone who was once their age. This hasn't changed. As adults, they still want to know the stories that both parallel and differ from their own. The difference is that they are now woven into the story as it continues to grow and to intertwine with theirs.

In the introduction to her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (Riverhead Books, 1994), Rachel Naomi Remen emphasizes the connectivity within our stories. “Hidden in all stories is the One Story. The more we listen, the clearer that Story becomes.” Stories remind us of our common humanity and telling them, Remen says, “weaves us into a family once again.” The electronic media has given us even greater access to the story of our commonality. Thus, my story can be connected with that of another mother halfway across the world. The downside is that, as our cultural obsession with reality TV and celebrity-watching increases, we tend to relish knowing the worst parts of other people's stories. Even feel-good accounts can lack the depth of a story that is told and retold in order to mine its significance.

Passing on the faith involves a storytelling process in which we make links between our personal and family stories and our Story as God's people. These encompass the joys and the agonies of life and loss, the fear and the excitement that accompany transitions, and the confusion and the clarity that can co-exist in the exploration of faith. Such stories are rooted in the family.

Family Stories

A common type of family story is linked with memory. These often surface during times of transition—at weddings, funerals, family gatherings, and seasonal celebrations, or when making a move to or from a home, job, or school. Telling them generates an awareness of belonging and continuity. Memory stories are repeated over and over again, sometimes venturing into the realm of myth. In the process of retelling, we gain insight into the people and experiences that have inspired and influenced us.

The Bible is replete with stories of remembrance. For thousands of years they were passed from one generation to the next as a way to understand the relationship between God and his people. A dominant thread in biblical stories is the constancy of God's presence, guiding humankind throughout history. They help us remember who we are and to Whom we belong. “...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). As families tell and retell their stories, they uncover the same lesson of these biblical tales—that God dwells among them, embedded within every family experience and relationship.

This is not to say that all memory stories are pleasant or even redemptive. Some are dark accounts of abuse, addiction, abandonment, or neglect. Even so, there is value in telling them, albeit carefully, because they shed light on our failings, losses, grief, and disappointments, as well as on our capacity to

RESOURCES ABOUT PARENTING AND FAITH

Jim Campbell, *52 Simple Ways to Talk to Your Children about Faith: Opportunities for Families to Share God's Love* (Loyola Press, 2007).

Campbell addresses 52 different faith themes, e.g., going to Mass, being a friend, making moral decisions, which come up in daily life. He suggests ways to use teachable moments to engage children and offers some resources to help frame the conversation.

Kathy Hendricks, *A Parent's Guide to Prayer* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2004).

A delightful account of how to pray with your children and create family rituals. There is a good chapter on how one's prayer changes when one is a parent.

The author, Kathy Hendricks, writes a family-centered column on timely topics on Sadlier's “We Believe” Website.

Mary Margaret Keaton and Thomas Roberts, *Imagining Faith with Kids: Unearthing Seeds of the Gospel in*

***Children's Stories* (Pauline Books and Media, 2005).**

A companion to consult for book and media choices for children.

Tom McGrath, *Raising Faith-Filled Kids: Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Spirituality at Home* (Loyola Press, 2000).

The subtitle *Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Faith* says it all. Among other themes, McGrath addresses prayer and ritual as a family, fostering forgiveness and empathy, and the images of God we use when speaking about God. There is also a study guide to facilitate use with a book club or parents' group.

Annemarie Scobey writes a column on family spirituality each month in the *U.S. Catholic*. A subscription to this magazine would provide a general update on Catholic issues and themes as well as this practical parenting column. The Claretian Fathers, who publish *U.S. Catholic*, also publish a newsletter for Catholic parents called *At Home*

with Our Faith written by Annemarie Scobey. Visit homefaith.com.

Susan Voight, *Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference: Helping Your Family Live with Integrity, Value Simplicity, and Care for Others* (Loyola Press, 2002).

Voight addresses twelve themes including identity, peacemaking, and service which are values you as a parent may wish to address or support.

Streaming video of Church in the 21st Century Center presentations are available online. Visit www.bc.edu/church21/webcast.html and search the names provided below:

- Kathy Hendricks. “A Garden of Grace: Practices for Family Life.” Search “Hendricks”.
- Jane Regan, et al. “Handing On an Inclusive and Just Faith: Parents Reflect.” Search “handing on an inclusive.”

endure, to survive, and to hope. Once again, the Bible is an illustration of such stories. The families who turn up in some of these tales could make even television's most bizarre reality-show families look comparatively normal. Biblical characters are sold into slavery by their brothers (Joseph), deceive their own father (Jacob), murder to satisfy their lust (David), vie with their siblings for attention (James and John), and play the victim (Martha). Over and over again, the stories serve as an illustration of God's part of the covenant—never abandoning his people despite their failed attempts to keep the faith.

Why Stories Matter

What do family stories have to do with handing on the faith? For one thing, they teach us something vital about the meaning in life. In her book, *Thin Places, A Pilgrimage Home* (Columbia University Press, 2009), anthropologist Ann Armbricht describes her experience of living in Nepal among people who continually tell tales of their ancestors. Stories, she says, are the way we make sense of our lives. "They are what we tell ourselves and others about who we are and what we want, about where we are going and why. They provide a fixed point, a secure place from which we can step into the world."

The repetitious nature of family stories is reflected in the way we go about formal catechesis in the Church. We tell and retell the great Story of our tradition—of the mystery of creation, of Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection, of the Spirit's life-giving presence. In each retelling, layers of meaning are uncovered as we mature in understanding and commitment to our faith. This allows us to make deep connections between our everyday and "peak" experiences and those of our religious beliefs, values, practices, and traditions. Following in the steps of our ancestors, we pass along our religious Story to succeeding generations, not just with words, but also through witnessing the love and compassion of Christ.

Stories also connect us with something larger than ourselves—our place within our nuclear and extended families as well as within generations of believers

who have preceded us. Stories may also provide us with a deeper understanding of our upbringing. Coming in touch with the latter can shed light on the images we have formed of God, the manner in which we either cherish or disregard religious tradition, the values we embrace, or the choices we make. This is why writing one's spiritual autobiography is an essential exercise for spiritual direction.

Walter Brueggemann, the Hebrew scripture scholar, says that children need to know stories of their faith tradition so that they can recognize their place within it. This means that they become active participants in the process by not only hearing the stories but also by telling spiritual stories in their own words and by bringing them to life through works, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to a more loving and just world.

From Story to Ritual

In addition to emphasizing the need for children to hear and receive the stories of their faith tradition, Brueggemann also stresses the need to celebrate them. This most often occurs during religious rituals, another process that is grounded in the home.

A ritual is a patterned way of doing something, one that is honed through repetition. The use of symbols becomes familiar through consistent use and their connection with particular days and seasons. Such repetition creates a sense of identity within our family, ethnic group, church, or society. Rituals also provide stability and comfort during times of grief or trauma. "Getting back to normal" often means that we can celebrate the way we used to with familiar rituals, symbols, and traditions.

The use of rituals is an important way that families pray together. Through them we express our spiritual and religious values. We give thanks, acknowledge our need for one another, and celebrate our blessings. In their book, *Rituals for Home and Parish* (Paulist Press, 1996), Jack Rathschmidt and Gaynell Bordes Cronin describe the link between domestic traditions and those that take place at church. Home ritual, they state, is what makes Sunday worship all the more

meaningful because it contains symbols that have a power greater than themselves. Such symbols "put us in touch with meaning and mystery in a way nothing else can."

Children come to learn the meaning of seasons and holidays, not in wordy explanations, but through their participation with parents and grandparents, siblings, cousins, and friends as they prepare, share, and later recollect each one. Repeating these celebrations with the turning of each year's cycle further reinforces a child's knowledge, appreciation, and recognition of these rituals and the stories that accompany each one. "Even when children do not understand the logic that shapes a particular event, they intuit the meaning of the celebration by processing the sounds, sights, smells, rhythms, and emotions of the experience" (Karen Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith*, Jossey-Bass, 2004).

When telling my family stories to my children, I often drew upon the rituals we celebrated. While my parents were not particularly conscious of it, they provided my siblings and me with a profound experience of the liturgical year by making our home the center of family gatherings. Many of these revolved around seasons and holidays. Like many other families, our seasonal celebrations were undertaken in ritualistic fashion. Out came the "tools" for particular holidays—the good china for Thanksgiving, and red, white, and blue paper plates for the Fourth of July. We baked or barbecued according to custom, and dressed up or down to create the environment and mood appropriate to the season. These experiences formed an essential groundwork for my later experience of Catholic worship as well as for the ways in which I would introduce my children to rituals and the celebration of our family and communal story.

It may not have registered at the time, but my childhood autobiography was a reflection of my early experience of growing up and into my faith, a way to look at who I was and where I belonged. I realize now that I started in just the right place—home—and ventured outward into a wider world. Later, my children helped me recognize the touchstones that stories provide at each stage of life.

These not only recall the past but also give us the impetus to live, as Remen puts it, "a life worth remembering." Rituals help to integrate the meaning of our personal story with our collective one. Taken together, story and ritual provide a powerful foundation for growing faith for a lifetime. It is only natural that the seeding place for each is the home.

Endnotes

KATHY HENDRICKS is a consultant for William H. Sadlier and a contributing writer for their materials, including *Gather In My Name*, a program of whole-community catechesis. She is author of the books *Everything about Parish Ministry I Wish I Had Known, A Parent's Guide to Prayer, The How-To's of Intergenerational Catechesis*, and *Parish Life Coordinators: Profiles of an Emerging Ministry*.

Faith of a Child

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in the Montessori community," admits Tina Lillig. "We are entering into a new moment in the history of this work. We began as a mustard seed and now we are experiencing the miracle and the burden of great growth. But there is something of the Spirit in all of this, and if we listen to it, it will drive us toward what we most need at this time in history."

Endnotes

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Experiential Religion

A Faith Formation Process for Children with Autism

As Susan Swanson makes clear in this essay, the parish is called to serve as a setting where all its members can grow in faith. In this article, Swanson attends specifically to the challenges of faith formation for children with autism. How can her experience and her concluding recommendations provide insight for the process of creating more inclusive and faith-formative parishes for those with disabilities?

BY SUSAN SWANSON, MA, CCC-SLP

As an autism consultant for a public school system, I began working with Justin just as he turned three years old. For nine years, I consulted to Justin's classroom monthly until this past year when he transferred to a private school specializing in autism. Justin communicates through single words, short phrases, and gestures. It is not always clear how much Justin understands although time and again he surprises me. Justin would often greet me by bringing his face within inches of mine, smelling me, and then smiling. After a few seconds he would then say, "Hi Sue." Sometimes after greeting me, Justin would become so excited that he would push his lower jaw into his hands in order to regulate himself.

As often happens after working with a student and his family for years, Justin, his family, and I had developed a special relationship. Two years ago, at the request of his parents, I supported Justin as he prepared to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. While it wasn't easy, Justin successfully made his First Holy Communion with the rest of his class. It was a momentous occasion for Justin's family, and I have no doubt that Justin understood that it was his special day and felt the joy of his family and friends.

My experience working with Justin and playing a part in his preparation to receive First Communion has had a profound impact on my own understanding of the Eucharist. Throughout Justin's catecheti-

cal process, it became evident to me that preparing Justin to receive First Holy Communion was more about the richness of his relationships with his friends, family, and community than it was about his conceptual understanding of the Eucharist. I realized that the most important part of the process was helping Justin foster loving and mutual relationships where he was an active and engaged participant in his faith community. And finally, I came to understand that receiving the Eucharist was about one's willingness to sustain and be sustained by experiences of the Divine within the transcending moments of relating to one another.

Families of children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder face multiple challenges in finding faith formation opportunities that are sensitive to their child's unique social, communication, sensory, and cognitive needs. Families frequently find little guidance in securing creative and meaningful ways to teach their child about God because traditional religious education classes are not designed to meet the specific learning needs of a child with multiple developmental impairments. The poignancy of this reality is often most deeply felt during times of sacramental preparation when a child with autism may not be able to demonstrate the requisite skills (e.g., reciting of prayers, explaining what the sacrament is about, performing the sacramental gestures) typically assumed to reflect a readiness to receive the sacrament. Few, if any, alternative models of formation are offered; it is no wonder that families become discouraged and feel marginalized within their faith community.

Such challenges raise deeper questions about what is the essence of faith formation. How does a faith community facilitate and support its members' experiences of the Divine? What are the fundamental theological and pedagogical assumptions influencing how one is taught about God? To oversimplify the question a bit, Do we come to know God primarily through the words of

others or do we come to know God through our experiences of God?

The Christian belief that we are made in the image and likeness of God calls us to experience the depth and breadth of our own humanity and in so doing we come to experience and therefore come to know the divinity in ourselves and in others. By experiencing God we come to know God. We experience God by noticing and attending to our bodily felt senses, identifying and assigning meaning to these felt senses, and responding from these felt senses. For many of us, this process leads to naming the bodily felt sense as a feeling. Coming to understand the feeling leads to coming to know oneself more fully. Naming and understanding one's own feelings helps us to recognize, name, and understand the feelings of others. And the more intimate our knowledge of another, the more we may be drawn to that person's unique mystery. In experiencing the fullness of ourselves and one another we therefore experience the mystery and fullness of God.

Experiential Religion and Autism

The formation of faith for a child with autism requires that it be experience-based and facilitated by persons informed and skilled in the use of interpersonal and learning supports. Given the profound challenges that persons with autism have with symbolization (e.g., language), a primary way of knowing God will be through bodily-felt experiences where primacy is assigned to feelings. Coming to know the fullness of oneself through experiencing, naming, and claiming one's feelings—within the context of right relationships—will allow the child with autism to know the divinity within themselves and in others.

My sojourn with Justin in his faith journey provided insights for my own understanding of the dynamics of faith formation for children with autism. In the process of helping Justin prepare for

Holy Communion, I witnessed Justin's capacity to feel what he was experiencing, to name the feeling, and to understand it. In essence, this was a formative experience of faith in which Justin came to know God more deeply not through words but through experience.

If we are committed to supporting all members of our faith community in their coming to know the Divine, we must acknowledge that there are many types and sources of knowing and that it extends beyond the knowledge of creeds and dogma. While many would agree that "knowing" often refers to a "cognitive process," it also refers to sensory, perceptual, and emotional processes as illustrated in the following example when Justin, his family, and I attended Mass together.

Justin came into church, saw me, entered the pew and gave me a brief smile as he sat down. As our gazes locked, we smiled at each other. For me, I felt a clear and strong feeling of love and affection for Justin that I communicated through my facial expression (eye gaze and smile), my physical proximity (sitting shoulder to shoulder) and through my touch (holding his hand). Justin's initial eye gaze and "forehead greeting" suggested an intimate and happy salutation of "I'm so happy you're here, Sue. I just want to 'take you in.'" When he seemed a bit more regulated and when I thought he could "take it in," I told Justin how happy I was to see him. He turned his head back to the front of the church and looked straight ahead as a smile slowly stretched across his face. Throughout Mass, Justin often requested one of his many favorite family photo albums to look at. He clearly enjoyed looking at the pictures of his family and friends taken at significant, emotionally rich events. He studied each picture as if it had been the first time he had seen the picture. Periodically, Justin initiated eye gaze with me and we would smile at each other. After these nonverbal exchanges, I wrote down how I was feeling at the moment, such as "I'm so happy to see you, Justin."



Photo courtesy of Allison Daigle

Justin learns to exchange the sign of peace with his classmate

not studying the Body of Christ, we were living the Body of Christ.

I have no doubt that over time, Justin's felt sense of church will be associated with the love and care he experiences at church and that the sensory experiences and familiar routines will be, on some precognitive level, associated with his bodily-felt experiences of love, care, and engagement. The smell of incense burning, the

coolness of the water when blessing himself at the church's entrance, the grandeur of the trumpet solo, the texture of the Communion wafer, and the changing postures of his body, from standing, to sitting, to kneeling—all of these sensory experiences will be gradually infused with Justin's interpersonal experiences of love and engagement. These are part of the faith community's corporate rituals that provide entry for all members into a faith community's celebration of God's love. Rituals such as being warmly greeted at the church's entrance, making the sign of the cross as Justin blesses himself with holy water, exchanging the kiss of peace with family members and friends, and receiving Holy Communion—all of these will be transformed into rituals of grace where God's presence is experienced within the interpersonal relating of Justin's faith community. As Justin continues to participate in his faith community's corporate rituals, it is possible that such experiences will deepen his experience of God at the very core of his being.

For all persons, religious ritual is experienced both consciously and unconsciously. It is a pattern by which we collectively speak to the experience of faith and it is the atmosphere with which the community comes together to experience, celebrate, and deepen its relationship with God. Personal religious rituals may serve the same function. Their meaning may not be transparent to others, but personal rituals may actually be more salient and helpful in deepening one's understanding and

relating to God because they are derived from the unique affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of a person. This may be particularly true for children with autism. Therefore, if we are committed to honoring the unique learning needs of persons with autism, we must actively support their use of personal rituals as a means of experiencing and expressing God's goodness and love while at the same time supporting their full participation in the faith community's corporate rituals and helping them to make the connections between the two. Those who are committed to providing such support are similarly responsible for making explicit the emotional and bodily-felt connections between the religious rituals and God's goodness and love as experienced in the concreteness of daily life. No doubt this is a formative process where one's deepening relationship with God—shaped by precognitive and bodily-felt knowing within the context of right relationships—is a lifelong process in faith formation.

Bringing It to Life

When creating faith formation experiences for children with autism, I keeping the following principles in mind:

- Faith formation for children with autism is first and foremost about knowing God rather than knowing about God. Knowing God implies experiencing God. Knowing about God implies the use of cognitive and meta-linguistic processing—learning processes that are often difficult for children with autism.
- Because we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:27), coming to know the fullness of oneself is coming to know the Divine that resides within us. In working with children with autism, it is only in giving primacy to feelings and to the process of experiencing them that a bodily-felt relating to the Divine is possible.
- Experiencing God is a whole-body event that involves attending to one's feelings. This

is often difficult for some children with autism because of pronounced sensory and emotional regulation challenges; thus, it is critical that individualized learning and interpersonal supports be integrated in supporting the child's capacity to attend to the experience at hand. In so doing, the child is able to experience the felt senses of their body, thereby allowing them the opportunity to name and claim the evoked feeling. Such experiences are growthful because they deepen one's sense of self and therefore one's felt sense of God.

- Religious experiencing requires that the person be actively interacting with the environment and those within it. For children with autism, this means being actively engaged in experientially based and meaningful learning opportunities embedded in everyday routines.

This formative process reflects the Christian belief that we are each called to experience the depth and breadth of our own humanity and by doing so come to know the divinity in ourselves and in others.

Endnotes

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Popular Catholicism and Faith Formation

The role of practices of popular Catholicism in fostering the faith of each generation of believers is significant. By examining the nature of these practices, we can become more aware of the role they play in our lives.

BY HOSFFMAN OSPINO

Few experiences compare to the profound impact that practices of popular Catholicism have in the lives of many Christians. When I was growing up I loved processions—and still love them very much. There were all kinds of processions in my parish: Corpus Christi, Christmas, Marian feasts, patron saints' feasts, and especially Holy Week. These were unique opportunities for me and my family to meet with other Catholics and to better understand certain aspects of our faith. For instance, in catechism classes we heard about Jesus dying for us; yet, regardless of how much we talked or read about it, Jesus' suffering and death made better sense on Good Friday when we participated in the *viacrucis* (the Way of the Cross) and the reenactment of the Lord's Passion. We were taught that Mary was our Mother but we experienced her maternal presence more profoundly when we walked for hours around our neighborhood carrying an image of *la Virgen* singing hymns and praying the rosary. Teachers told us that God was everywhere; however, this could not be more evident than at home where images and sacred corners set up by mom helped us to visually sense that presence. In my experience as a Latino Catholic in the United States, as well as in that of most Catholics around the world, faith formation and popular Catholicism are almost inseparable.

Practices of popular Catholicism hold an enormous power to communicate, nourish, and sustain the life of faith. Though such practices are not the exact equivalent to Catholic official devotions

(e.g., Eucharistic adoration, the rosary), they have a lot in common with these: they point to the sacredness of reality, they bring us closer in our relationship with God, and they actualize our Catholic imagination in unique ways. Because popular Catholicism is deeply ingrained in the practice of the faith of most Catholics, it is important that parents, teachers, religious educators, and church leaders affirm its pedagogical potential. Thus, from the perspective of faith formation, practices of popular Catholicism serve a twofold aim: they introduce us to the



Photo courtesy of BC Office of Marketing Communications

mysteries of our faith in ways that are very accessible and they invite us to continuously practice what we believe.

To better understand the pedagogical potential of popular Catholicism, I propose that we explore five key characteristics that are common to these practices.

First, practices of popular Catholicism take place in the context of *lo cotidiano*, the everyday. They happen in people's own time and space. As believers, we go about our lives every day searching for meaning and struggling with the many challenges that experience imposes upon us. It is in the midst of this searching and struggling that we open ourselves up to God and encounter the divine presence in ways that are transforming. God becomes

present in the blessing that parents give to their children before they leave home or before they go to bed, when the family says grace before meals, when we light a candle in a church, or when we turn to that sacred corner at home to pause for a moment. These practices are neither scripted nor highly sophisticated. They fit in the routine of our daily lives and become a continuous reminder that God is with us, here and now, regardless of where that here and now is for each person and community. These practices remind us that encountering God's

graceful presence does not mean that we must artificially separate the life of faith from everyday life. Faith would make little sense then; and so would life. Pedagogically, these everyday practices introduce us to a relationship with God, who is continuously coming to encounter us in the particularity of our lives, and invite us to remain attentive to that presence in the things that are most familiar to us.

Second, popular Catholicism has a powerful communal dimension that reminds us that faith is a vivid experience that we share with others. In this regard, popular Catholicism is intimately linked to the spirit of the liturgy and ultimately leads to a fuller appreciation of the liturgical life of the Church. Gathering

around the *altarcito* (little home altar) as a family to pray for someone who is sick or for the soul of a loved one who passed away asserts the relational ties that we share with one another, physically present or not. This communal dimension builds the sense of belonging to a body of people who constantly experience God's presence in their lives. Without a doubt, coming together to celebrate a *novenario de difuntos* (novena in honor of someone who died recently) or to be part of a *viacrucis* fosters a sense of family and community that is continuously nurtured by the beliefs that we share together.

Furthermore, the communal aspect of popular Catholicism implicitly points to its public dimension. When the community gathers at dawn on December 12th to serenade Our Lady of Guadalupe with *las mañanitas*; when thousands of Catholics join in processions through cities and towns; when walls and bridges are covered with colorful religious images in the barrios, these are public expressions that vigorously assert that faith is much more than a mere private affair. These expressions of popular Catholicism bring the faith of the people out into the public and provoke distinct responses: engagement on the part of those who are directly involved, whether introducing them to the experience for the first time or reaffirming lifelong convictions; curiosity on the part of bystanders; and critique on the part of those who reject or do not fully understand their meaning. Attention to the communal and public dimensions of such expressions is in itself an educational experience.

Third, popular Catholicism embodies deep faith convictions through language and expressions that are simple and accessible to believers. Simplicity and accessibility should not be judged as synonymous with poor theological reflection. On the contrary, it is about doing theology in a language that, while building on traditional concepts and more sophisticated categories, asserts

the symbolic and the practical. Popular Catholicism must be understood as a profound yet different way of interpreting and expressing one's faith. The percentage of Catholics who can, in fact, explain the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is relatively small. This does not mean that the dogma is irrelevant or that Catholics do not mind learning about it. However, carrying a medal with the image of the Immaculate Conception or joining a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France is the language that millions have readily available to point to the same reality. Popular Catholicism thus emerges as an articulation of deep faith convictions and understandings expressed in simple yet meaningful language. For millions of people, popular Catholicism is the starting point that helps them to name their experience of God. That is why authentic efforts of faith formation cannot disregard the value of these practices. On the one hand, they reveal a fundamental understanding of the faith that sustains the Christian community and serves as the grounding for a more systematic catechesis. On the other hand, conventional efforts of faith formation are renewed as the content of the faith becomes life in the language of popular Catholicism. It is a both/and relationship.

Fourth, practices of popular Catholicism empower believers to embrace creative leadership roles as they practice their faith beyond the traditional spaces and moments associated with the liturgy. Liturgical rituals in our Catholic tradition are regularly led by official ministers and take place in specific settings (e.g., church). Consequently, it is tempting to think that all celebrations of faith follow the same pattern. Rituals and practices of popular Catholicism are not equivalent to liturgical celebrations nor are they meant to replace them. Nonetheless, they offer spaces for women and men in non-liturgical contexts to lead ritual moments that also mediate God's presence as part of the sacramental worldview that shapes our Catholic imagination. In this context, parents emerge as the leaders of

small communities of prayer and ritual in their domestic churches—namely, their families. *Abuelas* (grandmothers) in Hispanic families play a significant role in handing on the faith to children and grandchildren through ritual and word. Elders and ancestors in Asian communities are ritually honored because of their experience and wisdom. Lay catechists preside over services of the Word in Bible study groups. Committed Christians visit the sick in hospitals and hospices and lead moments of prayer where sacramentals play an important role. All these rituals highlight the value of charismatic leadership, assert the conviction that God is mediated in the everyday, and empower Christians to creatively lead others in ritual celebration at all times. What a great way to educate Christians when people, families, and groups are empowered to share their faith through small rituals!

Fifth, practices of popular Catholicism cultivate the use of memory as the gift through which we remember, interpret, and envision. We remember the truths and convictions embodied in these practices by constantly repeating them in our daily routines. Taking a moment every day to read a passage from the Scriptures reminds us that God speaks to us today and that God's Word is truly "living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Through these practices, we interpret God's presence in history and in our lives. As believers, we read the symbols that identify our faith with the community that introduced us to them, but we also reinterpret them in light of our own experiences. The cross is a great example. Popular devotion to the cross traditionally reminds us about Jesus' sufferings as well as the challenge of being his disciples: "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). This falls under the traditional interpretation. But that same symbol was reinterpreted as a sign of protest by Lithuanian Catholics when their socialist government prohibited public expressions of the faith. A meaningful cross was removed from a hill; soon Catholics placed many more crosses in

the same location. In turn, authorities bulldozed all crosses; hundreds more appeared in a short period of time. Likewise, at the U.S.-Mexico border, hundreds of crosses are erected as a sign of justice and hope, remembering the hundreds of immigrants who died in the desert searching for a new life. Such ritual practices are certainly creative interpretations of a traditional symbol in a new context. Finally, practices of popular Catholicism offer a vision into a hoped-for future. We could say that they possess an intrinsic eschatological character. The celebration of *las posadas* every December, a beautiful ritual commemorating the biblical passage when Mary and Joseph search for hospitality in a time of extreme need, brings memories of struggle and hope to people's minds. In a country like the United States, continuously shaped by migration waves, such struggle is experienced daily by thousands of people who migrate and move. Nonetheless, by contemplating the ideal of God's divine love that translates into Christian hospitality, they move with unwavering hope to find a home, to be welcomed, and to be accepted.

These five characteristics make of popular Catholicism a powerful experience that introduces us to the mysteries of our faith in unique ways and invites us to continuously practice what we believe. Practices of popular Catholicism have a tremendous potential

for faith formation because they happen in the everyday, are communal and public, are simple and accessible, promote creative leadership, and cultivate the gift of memory. Church leaders and educators must be encouraged to see these practices as appropriate means to facilitate faith formation. To achieve this, we must foster a healthy relationship between sound catechesis and good praxis of popular Catholicism. Likewise, as we educate Christians in the faith, we must preserve the right relationship between these practices and the liturgy. Parents will discover that practices of popular Catholicism are often the best way to introduce their children to the faith. This is how the vast majority of Christians came to a better appreciation of Christianity since the beginning. Popular Catholicism kept the practice of the faith alive in the past, does it vibrantly in the present, and will continue to do so in the future.

Endnotes

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GROWING IN FAITH

With the help of a friend who was an architect, my parents designed and built our family home. Early in the process, my mother corrected the plans in order to enlarge the dining room. It was a prophetic decision. At the time my parents had two children. Four more would follow, along with a succession of in-laws and grandchildren. The dining room was a central site for holiday

celebrations and family events, a place made sacred by our stories, meals, and rituals. The impressions they made at a young age have stayed with me throughout my life, and formed a basis for understanding what it means to be part of a community woven together in faith, love, and commitment.

— Kathy Hendricks

Studying Teens and Religion

The “Take Away” for Catholic Congregations

BY THERESA O’KEEFE

During my years of work in the area of religious education and youth and young adult faith, I’ve consistently met with both the anxiety and the hope of parents, catechists, and ministerial leaders that there would be some “magic bullet” that would answer their concerns about growing faith in adolescents. Many are looking for that program or that trick that will work to catch and keep the attention of the youth in their care. They hope that if there was only some key that we could use to unlock the mysteries that make up adolescence, then we could compel them to remain faithful members of our congregations. That is why it is not surprising to see the popularity of Christian Smith’s 2005 publication *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teens*.

Among those working with youth—whether in parish, diocesan, or school settings—the research and writing of Christian Smith and his colleagues at the National Study of Youth and Religion has received a great deal of attention and notoriety. In fact, Smith’s book *Soul Searching* has recently gone into print in paperback. These days it is an accomplishment for any academic book to stay in print for more than a few years, so to be in continuous print since 2005 and now shift to paperback speaks to its widespread popularity—and seeming vitality—to youth work.

Background on the Study

Since 2001, a research project called the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) has been investigating the lives of American teens around questions of religious belief and practice. The project, funded through 2010 by the Lily Endowment, has been directed by sociologist Christian Smith, now teaching at Notre Dame University, but other notable colleagues, among them Melinda Lundquist

Denton and Mark Regnerus, have also contributed to the project and written reports. According to their Website:

The purpose of the NSYR is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent and perceived effectiveness of the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth’s lives, in order to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.

The work of NSYR is particularly valuable in that nothing of its scope or focus has ever been done. In recent years there have been a great number of studies on the lives of teens—examining the influences of media, eating and exercise habits, nutrition, socializing, technology, sexual activity, etc.—but no thorough study has been done on the issue of religious belief and practice. Instead, misconceptions based on anecdotes and impressions have been allowed to flourish, and these misconceptions have guided both parents’ behavior and congregational outreach.

NSYR’s project began by investigating youth from 13-17 years old and continues to study this same cohort. The project study is both quantitative (phone surveys with thousands of youth and parents) and qualitative (follow-up face-to-face interviews with hundreds of teens). The first major report published from the study was *Soul Searching*. Shorter reports have been published by the organization and are all accessible on their Website: <http://www.youthandreligion.org>. I would encourage readers to browse the site for other valuable resources.

Furthermore, the value of the project is enhanced because it is also a longitudinal

study that has returned to the same study subjects as they have aged (2003, 2005, and 2008). A major report on this newer data will be available later this year in another book by Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009). I expect that, too, will be a big seller.

Major Findings

In *Soul Searching*, Smith offers tables and charts showing the raw data as well as his interpretation of that data. This gives the reader an opportunity to read the data and ask their own questions of it. I name a few outstanding findings of the study as they relate to teens in general and Catholic teens in particular.

Contrary to common belief, Smith found that youth in this age group are positively disposed to religion. Also, many feel that religious faith is important to their day-to-day lives. They do not have strong negative feelings about religion or religious ideas, nor are they automatically antagonistic about religion or religious people. In fact, they generally go along with their parents on things religious.

- Most Catholic young people report that their religious faith is somewhat (42%), very (31%), or extremely (11%) important in shaping their daily lives and in making important life decisions.
- The majority of Catholic youth are somewhat (51%) or very (23%) interested in learning more about their faith.

This first finding is an important one, especially among parents who tend to lay off the religion stuff expecting strong opposition as their children get older. Likewise, many youth workers try to make religious practice attractive, assuming that they are fighting an uphill battle on the popularity front. In that regard, this first finding is good news.

But the rosy good news is tempered by the following findings: youth are involved in religious practices, but regular practice seldom holds a place of priority in their lives.

- 39% report attending Mass at least weekly and 52% report attending Mass 2 or 3 times a month or more.
- 34% of Catholic youth pray daily and 62% pray weekly.
- 46% report going to confession in the past year.

So while they were not antagonistic about religious belief and practice, many did not themselves participate regularly. Smith notes that teens’ level of participation in worship reflects that of adults, and the study showed that for the most part, teens attend worship with their parents. Interestingly, most teens admitted that they would participate in worship at the same level or more even if they were not required to by parents.

A third and perhaps more important finding is that religious beliefs are not widely understood. Smith found that the majority of youth, even those somewhat involved with religious practices, were dramatically inarticulate about the basics of their faith. The exceptions were those who have been well schooled in their religious communities. On this count, Roman Catholic youth reported very poorly. Yet it should also be noted that the more involved the teens were with their congregations, the more knowledgeable they were. However, the low level of regular involvement by the vast majority of teens meant that most were unable to clearly name what their tradition espoused, and spoke in very general terms.

Of Catholic Teens:

- 85% believe in God, 14% unsure, 1% not at all.

- 64% believe in a personal God involved in their lives.
- 67% believe in a judgment day, definitely believe in the existence of angels (58%), miracles (55%), life after death (45%), demons and evil spirits (28%), reincarnation (13%), astrology (11%).

One of the most striking findings that Smith reports is the nature of many teens' beliefs about God. Many parents and religious leaders on first blush would be happy that youth held any belief about God. But Smith notes that the nature of that belief may not be all that we would hope for—both for our teens or for the vitality of their membership in our congregations.

Belief about God: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Based on his findings, Smith makes an interesting observation about the belief of teens. He found that among most teens, regardless of faith tradition, there was by and large a belief in God that he named moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD). Smith spells out the particulars of MTD by defining each attribute.

By “moralistic” he discovered that teens believed that the primary reason for religious belief was to be a moral person. Religion was helpful in determining what is right and wrong action. While most religious believers would accept that this is an easily recognizable function of religious belief, Smith noted it as somewhat problematic. In part, it reduced belief in God to the merely functional. But on closer examination, he noted that it was even more problematic because of what one might call the lack of rigor of that moral action. As Smith defines it: “Being moral in this faith means being the kind of person that other people will like, fulfilling one’s potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious” (163).

As we can see, this is not a particularly high standard. Getting on well with others and doing one’s best do not speak to the

ethical challenges that really face people living in the contemporary world.

The second attribute, “therapeutic,” follows on the first in that it focuses on the benefit for the individual. Smith writes that this belief is:

“About attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people” (164).

According to this view, the purpose of religious practice is self-development. If it works for you, great, stay with it. The other side of that is, if it has no personal benefit, there’s no value to belief; there isn’t any reason to continue. Granted, one would hope that religious belief and practice are beneficial for the maturation of the believer, but, to speak in Christian terms, growing in discipleship can be somewhat more demanding than feeling personally fulfilled.

Finally, Smith speaks of “deism” as a belief in God as one who has set the world in motion but who is not intimately involved with its ongoing life. This God keeps a safe distance—available if called upon but not demanding or intrusive otherwise. As Smith notes, to be demanding would be in contradiction to the therapeutic element. The God of this faith solves problems, does not create them or challenge the believers. This God is likened to a powerful friend who can come in and aid in times of trouble or confusion, but stays on the sidelines otherwise.

Smith follows this with some of his own commentary, saying that considering the non-demanding, helpful, guiding God that most youth espouse, it is not surprising that they are positively disposed to religious belief. Likewise, it is not important that they really understand their tradition well. Smith writes, “As long as one is happy, why bother with being able to talk about the belief content of one’s faith?” (164).

“Yes, but...”: Concerns with the Study

I find Smith’s reading of the data interesting and helpful in many regards. However, I think it worth offering some caveats. One is that the study subjects

are quite young. His report is focusing on youth between the ages of 13 and 17. Many interviewed admitted that the interview was the first time anyone had asked them particularly about their beliefs. I would suggest that they—like many adults—have had little or no occasion to articulate their own beliefs without prompting or guidance.

The second caveat, for Catholic readers, is the need to recognize some of the presumptions of the study—for example, the opportunities for religious involvement available to different communities of teens. The study inquires frequently about a number of practices which have not been widely available to Catholic teens: youth groups, summer camps, mission trips. Religious communities have different histories and patterns of socialization by which their communities are formed and informed about the faith. While Protestant churches, both mainline and evangelical, have long used youth groups and youth ministers to form their youth into the life of the church, Catholics have relied upon parochial schools. Catholic parish elementary and high schools historically in the U.S. have been the primary location of formation for children and youth, and the primary recipients of significant staffing and funding. For a variety of reasons, both internal and external to the Church’s life, the numbers of youth attending Catholic schools has shrunk, and the Catholic Church has not dedicated similar levels of staffing or funding to other avenues of youth formation. Therefore, when the study inquires about youth participation in formative experiences, the Catholic youth by and large show very low levels of activity.

“Yes, but...”: How We Interpret the Study

Before we run off with a “kids today” line of argument, it is valuable to note one point that Smith admits to himself—youth seem to reflect the adults around them in many of their sensibilities about religion.

American youth actually share much more in common with adults than they do not share, and most American youth faithfully mirror the aspirations, lifestyles,

practices, and problems of the adult world into which they are being socialized (191).

This point is helpful in that it doesn’t simply blame teens for their lack of knowledge and concern, but sets it in the larger context of the world in which they live. In the final analysis, the report overall is a call to action, both for the sake of the youth and for the communities of faith in which they live.

Some people might criticize recent catechetical efforts for espousing “moralistic therapeutic deism” within preaching and formal religious education curriculum. However, I suggest that this image is easily found through various popular media—TV sitcoms, news programming, and even popular music. All of these easily have more “face time” with teens (and most adults) than any formal religious sources and become by default our primary religious educators. And while this image of God is not formally espoused in religious teaching and preaching, neither is it challenged.

Smith’s findings support this in that it is only those religious communities that create more of an enclave around their members who are more immune from this conceptualization of God. Such ecclesial communities—for example, the Latter Day Saints—spend great time and effort among youth and adult members on education and mission. This dual effort provides both resources and constant opportunity for learning and articulation.

So What Do We Do Now?

While the last comment might suggest that contemporary religious communities ought to retreat behind walls that will protect them from the teachings of contemporary culture, that’s not really a viable or attractive option. There is much about contemporary culture that is beneficial, not least of which is mixing with people different from oneself. However, I believe that Smith’s study points to two avenues of response that may be viable for families and congregations: increase participation in religious practices and opportunities for articulation.

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Handing on the Faith...

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us bear credible witness to *the way* of Jesus Christ? To the extent that a parish can say “yes,” it is an effective catechetical community.

Parish as worshipping community: of course, the primary function of liturgy is to worship God; to use liturgy to catechize in a didactic way would be an abuse of liturgy. On the other hand, precisely because it is so symbol-laden, the liturgy, as Vatican II declared, contains “abundant instruction for the faithful.” Referring to all the sacraments, the Council continued that “because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 33 and 59).

Good liturgy enhances people’s faith; poor liturgy is hazardous. So, the more a parish achieves “that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14), the more likely it is to catechize well. Beyond this, there are many ways that the liturgy can permeate the catechetical life of a parish. Parish meetings can begin with faith-sharing around a scripture reading from the previous or upcoming Sunday lectionary; a “Question of the Week” connected with the Sunday Gospel can be posted in the bulletin and used in catechetical sessions throughout the week.

Parish as community of welfare: living the way of Jesus demands the works of compassion and mercy, of justice and peace. So, every parish must be a community that cares for human welfare—spiritual and physical, personal and social. It should offer people the inspiration and organization, the support and occasion to carry on this aspect of God’s saving work in the world. When a parish outreaches to the poor and marginalized, when it participates in the social struggles for justice and peace, then it most likely hands on the faith effectively.

Parish as community of Word: a parish fulfills its ministry of the Word most eminently through the Sunday lectionary and preaching, and within its formal programs of catechetical education. However, Vatican II called Catholics to recenter the Word of God at the core of our faith. And gathering people to share their faith around scripture seems to have particular appeal and power to it. Conversations in which people bring their lives to the sacred text and the text to their lives enable people to personally appropriate the spiritual wisdom of the biblical Word. Every parish community should create and take every opportunity to teach and learn together around God’s Word that comes through scripture and tradition.

In sum, *total community catechesis* calls for a real coalition of family and parish, and then the formal programming to resource and engage every aspect of each to catechize in faith. Such catechesis will ask tremendous effort and a whole new way of thinking and proceeding, yet it is surely our best way forward in our time for handing on the faith.

Endnotes

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Studying Teens...

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Smith found that those youth more deeply involved in practicing their religion were “doing significantly better in life on a variety of important outcomes than [were] less religiously active teens” (28). Recent religious writers, including Dorothy Bass, argue that regular and consistent religious practices form minds and hearts into a way of life. This truth has been long known by Catholics, and members of other highly liturgical traditions. But frequently we shy away from asking teens to participate in religious practices, fearing they will be turned off. My response is that adolescence is a good time to increase involvement in practices, but not in a way that is merely token, or juvenile. The token opportunities will not have the desired effect. Practices only function to shape us if they are regularly practiced. Furthermore, teens yearn to be treated like adults. Participating in religious practices with members of the adult congregation creates an opportunity for teens to integrate into the maturing community of faith. They can and should be multiple: liturgical, social, service, and even educational, wherein the tools and language used are accessible to teens, make them feel welcome and important, but also draw them into ever maturing engagement.

Hand in hand with the first recommendation is creating greater opportunities to articulate what is at the heart of our belief. This may take the form of formal

religious education, but it may also be found in other informal settings. Teens, as well as adults, need opportunities to talk about what is important to them and why. They need to learn that practice within the community of believers who will help shape and challenge their thinking. Unfortunately, in most of our churches, it is only the leadership who get to do the talking while the congregation listens. Intentionally drawing adults and teens into the conversations about faith will serve to build up the confidence and intelligibility of all.

In both of these recommendations—practices and articulation—I am suggesting efforts that involve both teens and adults. For one of the strongest findings of Smith’s study is that there is a direct correlation between what teens find important and what their parents find important. Likewise, teens were more likely to be interested and involved in church life if they had made a connection there with other adults beyond their parents.

Neither of these recommendations would be classified as complex, nor are they magic bullets. They are instead broad-based efforts that would serve to enliven a congregation as a whole while grounding the younger members in a faith worthy of belief.

Endnotes

THERESA O’KEEFE teaches pastoral theology and religious education at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry where she also coordinates the contextual education program.

GROWING IN FAITH

The only granny I ever knew was not a very nice one; in fact, she had a biting tongue—especially for my grandfather. I’d love to portray her as the “anything goes—you’re in your granny’s” stereotype, but that would be a white-wash. Yet, she convinced me, more than anyone else, of the importance of Sunday Mass. For

“hard-wiring” something into my faith identity, the prize goes to Gran.

You see, Granny was both blind and crippled when I knew her; and that was long before my Irish village had wheelchairs and an accessible church. Yet, every Sunday she insisted on being carried out of her seat by the

fire in the living room, bundled into the back of a small Model T Ford, and taken off to Mass. She would sometimes shriek with pain when being lifted in and out; yet, the last thing she thought of doing was to miss Mass on a Sunday. To this day, I cannot either.

— Thomas H. Groome

S E P T E M B E R

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2009

PERFORMANCE

Two Jesuit Choreographers: East Meets West ■ **Presenters:** Robert VerEecke, S.J. and Saju George, S.J. ■ **Location/Time:** Robsham Theater, 7:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** The Jesuit Institute, Office of the Provost, and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-4002 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** October 2, 2009, C21 Center's "The Art of Believing" Series

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

SYMPOSIUM

Symposium on Interreligious Dialogue Understanding the Religious Other: Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogues ■ **Presenter:** David Tracy, Professor of Theology and the Philosophy of Religions, Divinity School, University of Chicago ■ **Location/Time:** Heights Room, Corcoran Commons, 4:00 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Theology Department, STM, and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0794 or www.bc.edu/interreligiousdialogue ■ **Webcast available:** October 9, 2009

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2009

PANEL

Latinos and U.S. Catholicism: Present Contributions and Future Possibilities ■ **Presenters:** Hosffman Ospino, Adjunct Assistant Professor, STM; Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Assistant Professor, STM; Roberto Goizueta, Margaret O' Brien Flatley Chair in Catholic Theology, BC ■ **Location/Time:** Fulton Hall 511, 7:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Oscar Romero Scholarship Committee, BC Theology Department, STM, and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-6501 or www.bc.edu/stmce ■ **Webcast available:** October 15, 2009

O C T O B E R

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2009

LECTURE

But Who Is That Other One Who Walks Beside You? ■ **Presenter:** Paul Mariani, University Professor of English ■ **Location/Time:** Heights Room, Corcoran Commons, 7:00 pm ■ **Sponsors:** English Department and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** October 20, 2009, C21 Center's "The Art of Believing" Series

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2009

LECTURE

A Journey and Not a Destination: Psychological and Theological Perspectives on Faith Development across the Life Cycle ■ **Presenter:** John McDargh, Associate Professor of Theology ■ **Location/Time:** Gasson Hall 100, 7:00 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Theology Department and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** October 22, 2009

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2009

LECTURE

Monasticism, Beauty, and Contemplation: Henri Nouwen Praying to Believe ■ **Presenter:** Robert Waldron, Author ■ **Location/Time:** Gasson Hall 100, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsor:** C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** November 5, 2009, C21 Center's "The Art of Believing" Series

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2009

CONFERENCE

A Future Full of Hope (Jer 29:11): Sustaining the Church in Hard Times ■ **Presenters:** Fr. Michael Himes, Professor of Theology; Colleen Griffith, Adjunct Associate Professor, STM; Melissa Kelley, Assistant Professor, STM ■ **Location/Time:** Heights Room, Corcoran Commons, 9 am to 3 pm ■ **Sponsors:** STM and C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-6501 or www.bc.edu/stmce ■ **Webcast available:** October 30, 2009

MONDAY & TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19 & 20, 2009
SATURDAY & SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24 & 25, 2009

SEMINAR

Encountering the Gospel/Renewing the Preacher—Seminar for Priests, October 19 and 20; Seminar for Permanent Deacons and Wives, October 24 and 25 ■ **Location/Time:** Connors Family Retreat and Conference Center, 9 am to 4 pm ■ **Sponsor:** STM, Archdiocese of Boston, and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** November 15, 2009

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2009

SYMPOSIUM

Symposium in Honor of Michael Buckley, S.J. ■ **Presenters:** Nicholas Lash, Emeritus Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge, *Oracles, Dissent, and Conversation. Reflections on Catholic Teaching* ■ **Respondent:** Fr. Michael Himes, Professor of Theology ■ **Location/Time:** Gasson Hall 100, 4 pm to 6 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Office of the University President and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** November 10, 2009

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2009

LECTURE

Ignatius with the Homeless: The Ignatian Spirituality Project, Faith in Service ■ **Presenter:** Thomas Drexler, Executive Director, Ignatian Spirituality Project ■ **Location/Time:** Murray Function Room, Yawkey Center, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Volunteer and Service Learning Center, Center for Ignatian Spirituality, and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** November 16, 2009

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2009

LECTURE

Mentoring Relationships in Ministry to Youth and Young Adults ■ **Presenter:** Theresa O'Keefe, Adjunct Assistant Professor, STM ■ **Location/Time:** STM, 9 Lake Street, Room 100, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** STM and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-6501 or www.bc.edu/stmce ■ **Webcast available:** November 19, 2009

N O V E M B E R

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2009

LECTURE

Liturgy Forming Faith: The Sacramentality of the Faithful on Sunday and through the Seasons ■ **Presenter:** Bruce Morrill, S.J., Associate Professor, Theology Department ■ **Location/Time:** 2101 Commonwealth Avenue, Brighton Campus, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Theology Department and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** November 26, 2009

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2009

LECTURE

The Eucharist and Our Formation as the People of the Church ■ **Presenter:** Cardinal Séan O'Malley, O.F.M., Archbishop of Boston ■ **Location/Time:** STM, 9 Lake Street, Room 100, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** STM and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-6501 or www.bc.edu/stmce ■ **Webcast available:** November 24, 2009

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2009

LECTURE

Philosophy and Contemporary Culture ■ **Presenter:** Alasdair MacIntyre, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Duke University and Permanent Senior Research Fellow, University of Notre Dame ■ **Location/Time:** McGuinn Hall 121, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** Philosophy Department and the C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** November 26, 2009

D E C E M B E R

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2009

LECTURE

Catholic Renewal and Reform: Four Decades Sharing in the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education ■ **Presenter:** David O'Brien, Professor Emeritus of History, College of the Holy Cross ■ **Location/Time:** Gasson Hall 100, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** The Jesuit Institute and C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-0470 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** December 15, 2009

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2009

C21 WOMEN'S SERIES

Unwrapping Faith for Our Children: Helping the Young Challenge Consumerism ■ **Presenters:** Dr. Mary M. Doyle Roche, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, College of the Holy Cross; Dr. Juliet Schor, Professor of Sociology ■ **Location/Time:** Heights Room, Corcoran Commons, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** BC Women's Resource Center and C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-3489 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** December 16, 2009

WEDNESDAYS, DECEMBER 2, 9, 16, 2009

PRESENTATION

3rd Annual Alumni Advent Evening Series: Ignatian Spirituality at Work ■ **Location/Time:** The Boston College Club, 100 Federal Street, Boston, 5:30 pm ■ **Sponsors:** BC Alumni Association's Office of Spirituality and Service and C21 Center ■ **Information:** 617-552-1171 or www.bc.edu/church21 ■ **Webcast available:** January 13, 2010

ABBREVIATIONS

*C21 Center: The Church in the 21st Century Center

** STM: BC School of Theology and Ministry

theCHURCH *in the 21ST CENTURY*
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