

# Adolescent Catechesis: Where Are We Now and Going?

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First, let me offer the highest compliments to this Partnership in Adolescent Catechesis (PAC) and its three constitutive groups, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), and the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL). This National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis (NIAC) offers a renewed model of collaboration for the whole educational and ministerial mission of the Catholic Church in our country.

My assigned task—with a warning to be brief and be gone—is to take the present “mind of the church” regarding adolescent catechesis as reflected in its official and semi-official documents, universal and national, and to imagine some next steps for the way ahead. So, “this being said” by our church, how should we reach from here in our commitments and practices?

The contemporary texts most relevant to adolescent catechesis would begin with the documents of Vatican II, especially its “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” (*Ad Gentes*—launching the renewed emphasis on evangelization), and the less auspicious “Declaration on Christian Education” (*Gravissimum Educationis*). Then we add the two great Apostolic letters, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI (1975) and *Catechesi Tradendae* of Pope John Paul II (1979), as well as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994—English edition, hereafter *CCC*) which provides “the doctrinal point of reference” for all catechesis and evangelization.

The historic “directories” of the Catholic Church that attend specifically to catechesis began with the *General Catechetical Directory* (1971); this was inculturated into the American context with the *National Catechetical Directory* (1979). These benchmarks were followed some 25 years later by the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997,

hereafter *GDC*) and then, from the U.S. Catholic Bishops, the *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005).

Other important American documents include *A Vision of Youth Ministry* from the USCC (1976), followed by *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* from the USCCB (1997). Significant as well are two collaborative documents published through NFCYM: *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis* (1986), and *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization* (1993). And you might want to add others.

For a review of these documents and their evolving wisdom about adolescent catechesis I highly recommend the very fine essays in the *Source Book on Adolescent Catechesis, Volume I*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter *Source Book*) published by NIAC for this symposium. By way of summaries, you will find most helpful Maura Thompson Hagerty’s “What the Church Has Been Telling Us about Adolescent Catechesis,” and Dan Mulhall’s “What the New National Directory for Catechesis Says About Adolescent Catechesis.”

The other essays in the *Source Book* do an excellent job of outlining the sociological research on youth and religion (Jeffrey Kaster), the cultural context and its challenges for adolescent catechesis (William Dinges and Michael Lee), and how we might reach into the horizon (Michael Theisen, Laura Henning, Michael Warren, and Michael Horan).

With such fine resources so ready-at-hand and at this point in the symposium, I feel a little like a corpse at an Irish wake; you probably should have a speaker for the occasion but I am not expected to say very much. Faithful to my assignment, however, I will a) summarize what I perceive as the present catechetical consensus in the “mind” of the church, and then b) how we might reach from here.

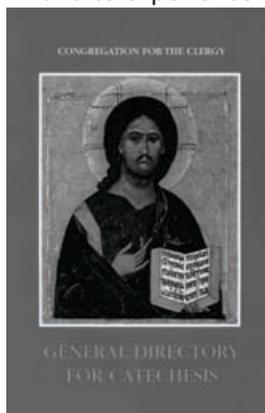
## Consensus and Clarity

Reviewing the documents as Thompson, Hagerty, and Mulhall do so well, I note an amazing consensus—given the preceding debates and controversies—that has gradually emerged regarding catechesis in general and thus for adolescent catechesis in particular. Indeed, the first time that the Catholic Church’s idealized understanding of catechesis can be realized is in adolescence, when young people begin to be developmentally ready for catechetical education<sup>2</sup> that entails critical reflection on life, substantive study of Scripture and tradition, and personal embrace of a chosen faith. The Catholic Church’s catechetical hopes begin to take full force at the time of adolescence.

I first identify our catechetical consensus as “classically Catholic” for instead of responding either/or to many issues and questions, our church—when at its best—encourages both/and responses. So, we embrace both nature and grace, Scripture and tradition, reason and revelation, word and sacrament, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Similarly and with urgency, the church now directs us to make a both/and response to the many either/or controversies that have beset contemporary catechesis since its renewal began more than a hundred years ago (circa 1900 with the “Munich Method”).

Perhaps the most significant both/and statement is from the *GDC* that catechesis is constituted by “transmission of the Gospel message and experience of Christian life.” (#87, echoing Canon 773) Catechetically, we always need to receive, deepen, and pass on our Gospel faith and to experience Christian living. Does anyone

remember the raging debate of the late ‘60s and ‘70s: “should catechesis be experiential or kerygmatic”? Well, the debate is over; the Catholic Church says it must be both: engaging people’s experience and teaching the kerygma of faith. As I note below, both are needed if our pedagogy is to integrate them into a lived and living faith.



With this fundamental both/and in place, many others follow on. So, the Catholic Church urges catechetical education that both nurtures disciples and instructs well in faith, that socializes into Catholic identity and educates in Scripture and tradition. We must do both catechesis and religious education. For indeed “it takes a village” to raise a Christian and the church adds wisely, “a village—with a school” or some intentional program of catechetical education. Additionally, people’s literacy in Catholic faith must be both informative and performative, entailing both instruction and practice, with the latter not simply the consequence but, in a cyclical way, a source of education in faith.

And there are other dyads to be united, albeit at times with fruitful tension. So, all catechetical education must be faithful to the core truths and values of Catholic faith and yet adapted to communicate according to the age and culture of participants; here, adolescents are often mentioned explicitly. There is need for both formal and informal catechesis (e.g., retreats), to promote both “initiation and apprenticeship in the entire Christian life” (*GDC* 97).

The Catholic Church’s catechetical documents now reflect a clear consensus that catechesis is a function within the overarching process of evangelization. However, the “new evangelization” so championed by Pope John Paul II is marked by a profound both/and: to bring people “into” the church and to bring Christians “out” of the church and into the world with a lived and living, hope-filled and joyful Christian faith. Likewise, the focus is on both personal conversion of people to become disciples of Jesus and that they evangelize their culture with Christian values and ethic. Christians must bring the “Good news into all the strata of humanity” (*EN* 18), “into the very heart of culture” (*CT* 53). For this reason, every Christian community needs both to evangelize and to be evangelized itself.

In the pedagogy of teaching/learning events, the Catholic Church also urges both/and approaches. So, we should employ a *deductive* pedagogy where people draw out the implications *for life* from clear instruction, and likewise an *inductive* approach whereby they learn *from life* and from their efforts

at lived Christian faith. Echoing a point made above, the very dynamics of our pedagogy should be both *experiential* and *kerygmatic* because all catechesis must encourage the integration of life and faith into lived and living faith—faith that is realized now and remains vibrant and growing, lifelong. Because some are still reluctant to embrace this both/and pedagogy—even among our bishops—let me quote some relevant texts here.

Our pedagogy must promote “a correct correlation and interaction between profound human experiences and the revealed message” (*GDC* 153). For it is by “correlating faith and life” (*GDC* 207) that “catechesis . . . bridges the gap between belief and life, between the Christian message and the cultural context” (#205). Religious educators must not only teach the faith tradition but also engage people’s lives in the world because “experience is a necessary medium for exploring and assimilating the truths which constitute the objective content of Revelation” (*GDC* 152). Thus, an effective catechetical pedagogy presents every aspect of the faith tradition “to refer clearly to the fundamental experiences of people’s lives” (*GDC* 133).

So, while instructing well in Christian tradition, “one must start with praxis to be able to arrive at praxis” (*GDC* 245). I summarize such pedagogy as enabling people to bring their lives to their Faith and their Faith to their lives, with the intent of lived and living Catholic faith.

While we should take a both/and approach to all such dyads, there also are triads which the Catholic Church insists that we honor rather than favoring any one. So, we are to *inform*, *form*, and *transform* people in Christian faith, the latter as lifelong conversion—*metanoia*. Such holistic catechesis is required because Catholic faith is *cognitive*, *affective*, and *behavioral*. We must instruct people well in its *truths*, nurture their *prayer and worship* life, and form them in the moral values and virtues of Catholic *ethics* and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. The latter is fostered especially by facilitating the practice of works of compassion, justice, and peacemaking.

## Stretching from Here

With such consensus and clarity in place, we could well wonder if anything more needs to be *said*. However, it is not our theoretical clarity that falls short but our pastoral practice. As my nephew says about his golf game, if he could just take a written exam in it, he would shoot at par; he has read so many instructional manuals. So, with such wisdom at our fingertips about catechetical education in general and adolescent catechesis in particular, how can we improve our game? That we need to play a lot better is verified by the research; our Catholic communities often do not do as well as other Christian denominations.<sup>3</sup> So, might we hit a bucket of balls (or two) to improve the following ten practices.

### *Practice One*

Stating the obvious, whatever we do by way of ministry with adolescents must include intentional catechetical education. This is to say no more than the *GDC*, that all Christians are in need of “permanent catechesis”—lifelong. However, we have been doing little of late for our high school age students by way of catechetical education. Many Catholic high schools do not take full advantage of their opportunity to offer a substantive theological and scriptural curriculum. For almost thirty years of teaching undergraduates at Boston College I have met too many who come in with “advanced placement” courses (i.e., college level) in math and science but know little about their Catholic faith. Even parishes that have strong youth ministry programs too often are lacking in teaching/learning events that educate in faith.

Now, many Catholic high schools and parish youth ministry programs have been very effective in nurturing what I would call a performative literacy in faith. This generation of young people know far better than mine did that the works of justice and compassion are integral to Catholic faith; that Christian discipleship entails serious social responsibilities and calls us to favor the ones who need the favor most—the poor. Our service and immersion programs in works of justice and compassion are very effective.

However, today’s adolescents do not have sufficient cognitive literacy in their faith. Too many

do not really know it at any depth—comparable to their math, science, or social studies. We must redouble our efforts to bring our youth to “know” their faith. I mean this in the full Lonerganian sense of knowing that has them attend to its data in-depth and come to personal understanding of it, and then to make judgments and life decisions in response to it. As they make their own such holistic knowledge of their faith, they should be able to recite “by heart” the core symbols and sacraments, dogmas and doctrines that are constitutive of Catholic identity.

In enabling adolescents to know their faith, the U.S. Bishops’ “Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age,” issued November 2007, may be of help. I have my reservations about its theological conservatism and whether it can connect with young peoples’ stage of faith development. For example, it focuses almost exclusively on the Christ of faith, on the Son of God coming down to save us from our sins, to the neglect of the historical person who walked the roads of Galilee, calling all to live for God’s reign. The Jesus of history is far more likely to appeal to young people. But if we still insist upon good pedagogy to implement the Framework—and who would want anything less—it could help to ensure that our high school and parish catechetical curricula teach the breadth and depth of Catholic faith.

### *Practice Two*

I reiterate, and again echo the documents, that “it takes a village” to nurture the faith of adolescents, albeit a village with a school or intentional program. The parish must come to recognize that care for the faith identity and catechetical education of its adolescents is the responsibility of the whole faith community. Here I echo the principles of what is being called “whole” or “total” community catechesis (TCC). Regardless of how such an approach might be organized or implemented programmatically, TCC means that every aspect, feature, and ministry of a parish must be scrutinized for what it is teaching and

intentionally harnessed to nurture and develop the faith of its people.

For adolescents in particular this means that at least some parish liturgies must “connect” with their lives and hearts, that our communal structures and shared life invite their participation and gifts; that our ministries of the word lend them ready access to the spiritual wisdom of Scripture and tradition, and that the faith community’s works of justice and compassion be to, with, and by them. Effective adolescent catechesis calls for vital faith communities that invite their active participation as both agents and recipients of all the church’s ministries.

### *Practice Three*

Within total community catechesis, let me highlight the role of parents in the catechetical education of their adolescents. It is imperative that we support and resource families to be “households of faith” that can nurture the faith development of their teenagers. It seems to me that we are slowly coming to capitalize on the role of parents in the faith formation of younger children, but tolerate a parental drop off from the faith life of teenagers. The truth is that the parents of teenagers—perhaps most of all—need support, suggestions, and encouragement to continue in their function assigned by baptism as the “first educators of their children in the ways of faith.”

Schematically, it can help to think of the family as the “domestic church”—an ancient notion revived by Vatican II. As “church,” then, the family, in its own way, takes on all of the fourfold core ministries of a Christian community: word (*kerygma*), witness (*koinonia*), worship (*leitourgia*), and well-being (*diakonia*). The latter three



require that the ethos of the home be suffused with Christian values, that it have patterns of shared prayer/worship, and that it practice together the works of justice and compassion. But perhaps most crucial of all at this age is that parents and guardians continue to share their own “word” of faith with their teenagers. Given the developmental tensions of adolescence, apparently many parents pull back from such conversations, having readily had them during the preteen years. But we must encourage parents to hang in with their “ministry of the word,” continuing to share and witness to their own faith.

#### *Practice Four*

With the *GDC*, a growing evangelizing consciousness has flourished for Catholic catechetical education; the point and purpose of it all is to bring people into “communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ” (#80, quoting *Catechesi Tradendae* #5). This emphasis on the centrality of discipleship to Jesus Christ needs to be writ large with adolescents. For as the *CCC* summarizes, the heart of Christian faith is not the Bible, the sacraments, the dogmas of the Catholic Church, the commandments, etc. (vital as all these are). Rather, “At the heart of catechesis we find a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father” (*CCC* #426). And note well the wording; the *CCC* explicitly names both “Jesus of Nazareth” and “the only Son from the Father.”

Here we have the most amazing claim of our Christian faith and its greatest gift, the Incarnation—that God came among us as one of ourselves in Jesus Christ. Young people, perhaps more than most, need to encounter his personhood in both its humanity and divinity. They need to be apprenticed to the “Jesus of history” who modeled “the way, truth, and life” (John 14:6). What an extraordinary example he set, and so high; no religious tradition has such an imitable and life-giving model of truth and values. I am convinced that the Jesus of history has the most powerful appeal to adolescents, when young people search intensely for heroes and models for their burgeoning idealism.

On the other hand, they also need to develop deep trust in “the Christ of faith.” They need

to be convinced that the wonderful truths and extraordinary values that Jesus modeled can be lived because of his death and resurrection, that by the paschal mystery, Christ is our Savior, Redeemer, and Liberator. The amazing life of Christian faith is both modeled and made possible by Jesus Christ. In sum, for adolescents every catechetical theme and event should be related to Jesus Christ; the whole scope and sequence should be Christocentric.

#### *Practice Five*

My next point is about *listening*, us to them and they to themselves and to each other. First, lots of people say that we should *listen* to our youth but that often sounds a bit gratuitous as if we assume that we really do know what is best for them. Our listening is often a token, letting them speak, until we have an opportunity to speak ourselves. Whereas, in fact, *we were never their age*; their culture is not what ours was—we were then, this is now. *We must* listen, simply because we do not know better than them what *they* know. And remember, by their baptism, deepened for many in confirmation, “we were all given to drink of the one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

And because they have been gifted by the Holy Spirit—in myriad different ways—and are invited now to “no longer be children” but rather “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, in Christ” (Ephesians 4:14-15), we must encourage them to speak their own word about life and faith, to listen to themselves and to each other. Developmentally they can now move beyond purely concrete thinking and can listen more deeply to their own wisdom, even to “think about their thinking,” so essential for critical social consciousness which likewise is integral to ongoing Christian conversion. Adult mentors can encourage such self reflection and listening among teenagers more by the questions we ask than the statements we make.

The undergirding issue here may be whether or not we treat them as agents of their faith rather than as dependents on us and our wisdom. The truth is that every member of the Christian community is gifted somehow by the Holy Spirit, and all the Spirit’s gifts are given “to equip the holy

ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4: 12). We need to convince ourselves that they are perfectly capable of being disciples of Jesus Christ, often more faithfully than ourselves. Let us engage adolescents as agents of their faith, encouraging them to minister to each other, to the faith community, and to allow their faith to permeate their culture.

#### *Practice Six*

We need to both honor their interests and get them interested in what should be of interest to them. People seldom learn anything of any significance if they are not interested. From my own catechetical praxis, I have found that the most effective way to both engage and stimulate the interests of adolescents is to pose great life-questions that they are now asking with urgency for the first time. I am thinking of questions like “who do you think you are,” “what’s it all about,” “what would give you real joy,” “what is your heart’s desire,” “what time do you have and what will you do with it,” and “who is your neighbor.” Such existential and ultimate questions are likely to engage their interest and to position us strategically to tell the Christian story that responds to life’s ultimate questions with great spiritual wisdom.

#### *Practice Seven*

Following on and by way of good education, students must come to understand their faith in their own terms, to make it their own, to see for themselves what it means for them, and then to put their Christian faith and its spiritual wisdom “to work” in their everyday lives. Here we can echo, as Mike Horan does in his essay in the *Source Book*, the subtle distinction that our Spanish speaking friends make between *saber* and *conocer*. For we must bring our young people to both the intellectual knowledge and the spiritual wisdom of their faith, to cognition and to recognition as well. (Note again the pedagogy of “the Stranger” on the Road to Emmaus; he brought them to cognition upon the road but to recognition in the breaking of the bread; Luke 24, 13-35).

Such thorough knowledge and embrace of its spiritual wisdom demands that we invite adolescents into the deep currents that have constituted the great river of Catholic Christian

faith for nigh two thousand years. I am thinking of informing and forming people well in Catholicism’s anthropology (its positive understanding of the person and the covenant of nature and grace), its cosmology (a sacramental outlook on life), its sociology (that we are “made for each other,” to be brother’s and sister’s keepers for the common good of all), its epistemology (reaching beyond knowledge into spiritual wisdom for life), and so on.

#### *Practice Eight*

We need to offer our adolescents a new apologetic for Christian faith. The previous apologetic was based largely on naked authority; you must believe this because the Catholic Church says so or face dire consequences—literally with “hell to pay.” Perhaps this worked with previous generations of youth but it will not work with this one. Here let me draw attention to the positive apologetics modeled by Pope Benedict XVI during his recent visit to America. Instead of authoritarianism, in sermons we saw the classic threefold functions of rhetorical persuasion: *pathos* appealing to desire; *logos* appealing to reasoned argument; and *ethos*, appealing to the witness of lived Christian faith. Following this pattern, Benedict repeatedly appealed to peoples’ deepest desires with the beliefs, values, and beauty of Catholic faith, he offered coherent arguments for its truth claims, and pointed to the life-giving fruits of lived Christian faith: for the person and society.<sup>4</sup>

And even as we are more persuasive on behalf of Catholic Christian faith, we must always respect the freedom of participants and never manipulate or indoctrinate; that would be unworthy of the Gospel.<sup>5</sup> Remember the “rich young man” whom Jesus encountered—analogous to an adolescent today (Matthew 19:16-22). Jesus heard his genuine desire for “eternal life” and appealed to it with a challenge; the young man declined. But instead of threatening or berating him, Jesus left him with the freedom to go away. Again, notice Jesus in John 6 when because of his “hard sayings” “many disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (6: 66). Instead of forcing them to follow, Jesus gave those remaining total freedom: “Do you also want to leave” (Jn 6: 67). The apologetic we offer should be persuasive and yet honors people’s freedom in faith.

### Practice Nine

As I re-read many of the Catholic Church's catechetical documents for this occasion, I noticed throughout a consistent note of concern (if not pessimism) about adolescents and their youth culture. About adolescents, the Catholic Church seems to accept—too readily, I contend—the typical social assumptions that they are very difficult people going through a very difficult time. Someone said to me recently when I boasted about my little seven year-old son Teddy, “too bad he'll grow up to be a teenager.” A similar sentiment, though not quite so blatant, runs throughout the Catholic Church's catechetical documents and can find support from sociological and developmental researchers.

Of late, however, I have come upon literature that emphasizes adolescence as a time of great idealism which can be appealed to and encouraged. For example, Christian Smith urges “that adults . . . stop thinking about teenagers as aliens.”<sup>6</sup> This is surely the attitude that catechists and parents should take, especially if we believe in the essential goodness of the human person and the enhancing power of God's grace in Jesus Christ which are classic Catholic doctrines. Rather than adolescence as a problem to be solved or a cross to be carried, let us look upon it as a time of amazing grace when young people can come into a chosen identity in faith that enriches their own lives and “the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Then, regarding youth culture, indeed it is typically rife with individualism, materialism, commercialism, narcissism, and, as William Dinges writes, “saturated with violence and hyper-sexuality.”<sup>7</sup> Our catechesis must nurture in them a critical social consciousness that enables adolescents to critique and resist the negative influences of their culture. However, from the beginning of the church, Catholic faith has never seen what humans create (culture) as inherently evil. As Justin Martyr argued (circa 160 CE), every culture has “seeds of the word of God” already present within it, before the Gospel ever arrives. Adolescent culture has its seeds as well as its weeds. As Tom Beaudoin has argued convincingly, there is a “virtual catechesis” going on in youth culture that we must tap into and build upon.<sup>8</sup>

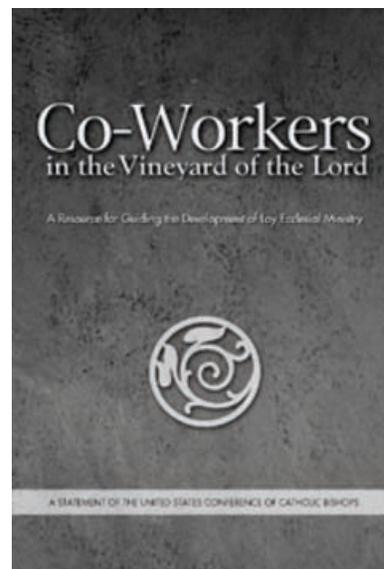
### Practice Ten

My last point may sound institutionally self-serving, as if I am taking the opportunity for a free commercial break for the graduate institutes of ministerial education in so many of our Catholic universities, Boston College among them.

In fact, I can appeal to the call to arms we have in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* and likewise to the national criteria established for the certification of lay ecclesial ministers.

The Council of Trent recognized that a prime condition which led to the Protestant Reformation was the inadequate preparation of priests. So, that great Council ordered the establishment of seminaries where candidates for priesthood would receive thorough preparation, theologically, spiritually, and pastorally. Since then, the Catholic Church has made a huge investment in the education of its priests, and rightly so. Now, in the aftermath of Vatican II and with the “explosion” of lay ecclesial ministries which emerged from that Council's reclaiming of baptism, the Catholic Church must broaden its investment to prepare well all who are in formal functions of ministry.

We would not need doctoral dissertations to tell us—though they do—that pastoral ministers who have advanced theological education, spiritual formation, and pastoral preparation far outstrip the effectiveness of good willed but unprepared volunteers. We simply *must* take ministry for and with adolescents as seriously as any other; none is more strategic to the life of our Catholic Church.



### **About the Author**

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>*Source Book on Adolescent Catechesis: Volume I*, Partnership on Adolescent Catechesis: Washington, D.C. 2008

<sup>2</sup>I often use this phrase “catechetical education” to capture the values of both catechesis and religious education, an aspect of the both/and consensus that I presently outline.

<sup>3</sup>See Jeffrey Kaster, “The State of Adolescent Catechesis Today: A Review of the Literature,” in *Source Book: Volume I*, pp 7-16

<sup>4</sup>See Thomas Groome, “Benedict XVI: Pilgrim of Hope with a New Apologetic,” in *Catechetical Leader*, July/August, 2008, Vol. 19, No. 4

<sup>5</sup>See also Michael Warren, “Reflections on Parish and Adolescent Catechesis,” in *Source Book: Volume I*, pp 37-42

<sup>6</sup>Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching*, New York: Oxford Press, 2005, p 264

<sup>7</sup>William Dinges, “The American Cultural Context for Adolescent Catechesis,” in *Source Book: Volume I*, p 43.

<sup>8</sup>See Thomas Beaudoin, “Virtual Catechesis” in Thomas Groome and Harold Horell, eds., *Horizons and Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, New York: Paulist Press, 2003, 63-80