

A Bold Design Built on Rock: Constructing a Plan for Adolescent Catechesis

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Introduction: A Context for the Construction Project

The National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis (NIAC) was established to address the needs of Catholic teenagers and to renew the work of those who serve to foster their faith as Catholics. This essay aims to provoke thought and spark discussion among those who participate in the Initiative through a variety of ways: discussion groups, planned regional meetings, participation through the Internet, and the National Symposium in November 2008. The essay glides across the surface of some important issues that merit further reflection and sustained discussion as the participants consider various facets of the life of adolescents and those conditions that contribute to effective catechesis. Among these are the current religious landscape of the United States, the state of Catholicism, the religious, theological, and psychological needs of adolescents and the adults who love them, the tradition of catechesis in parishes and schools in the United States, and the insights we can gain from considering these aspects of the life of teenagers today. Probing those issues and designing a plan will be the consolation and the task of the Initiative participants over the course of months and even years into the future. What follows is one person's attempt to provoke thought and encourage reflection, analysis and discussion, and thereby promote the work of many on behalf of many, a holy work that will serve adolescents.

Followers and Friends of the Lord

The Christian life of discipleship—a life of following Jesus as a companion and acknowledging him as the leader and Lord of life—normally begins by encountering other disciples. Another person's life attracts because that life appears to be authentic, meaningful, and full. The Gospels relate that the

first disciples followed Jesus by accepting his invitation to “come and see” where (and how) he lived, propelled as they were by curiosity and admiration, and a healthy sense of risk. Catechesis aims at fostering mature faith by mentoring disciples in faith and helping them to know how to become mature doers and believers of the Gospel with a sense of identity as followers of the Lord Jesus. Disciples grow as people who are interested in knowing Christ not so much by willing as by doing. They begin to behave in the ways that their leaders and mentors behave. Internal acceptance of Jesus as the Christ often follows from engaging in the behaviors of another follower. What are these behaviors? The actions performed by disciples of Christ—the practices that embody the life of Jesus—are difficult to do but not hard to name. These practices are well known to anyone who claims the name Christian. The practices include these:

- Offering hospitality to the stranger
- Pondering the Word of God in Scripture
- Worshipping the God whom Jesus calls Abba, both communally in the breaking of the bread, and individually in prayer
- Banding together with others who want to serve the world that God loves by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and teaching the little ones who are closest to God's reign
- Proclaiming and promoting the reign of God in the world that does not always reflect Jesus' dream of justice in the reign of God
- Anticipating the lavish ways of God's reign by forgiving others as God forgives
- Bringing the Gospel into the core of one's decisions in life, considering how the message of the Gospel ought to permeate one's life, deeds, thoughts



These practices help the disciple to become authentically Christian because they reveal the risen presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit to those who have eyes to see. It is interesting to note that the closing chapters of the Gospels include these practices. The disciples who see Christ appear in risen body have been doing these practices. Mary at the tomb (in John's Gospel) or the women at the tomb (in Matthew), the disciples on the shore of the lake (in John's Gospel) and the two on the road to Emmaus (recounted in Luke's Gospel) are engaged in the practices of discipleship at the time of the appearances.

Practices can be *formative*, but they cannot be *transformative* unless the disciple wants to think critically about them. How does one "learn" this kind of discipleship and ultimately give oneself to the ways of Jesus? For most people the actions of being a Christian among a group of Christians sparks reflection and begins to shape their belief.¹ Communities help them to form and articulate their belief; interaction with others brings them to reflect on and internalize the gospel message. Worship and reflection, instruction and prayer, spiritual direction and retreats, all these function to help people to think through the implications

of the actions they either take or receive in a Christian community. For some disciples, that community begins in one's family home, with a sense of connection in faith. For others it happens later in life and in other arenas.

Anyone who lives a faith life mentors others by both deeds and words. The example of other people—that which attracts inquirers to wonder about the Christians—has the potential to incite more than wonder. Practiced faith—the ways it either conforms to the gospel or sullies it—can either edify or scandalize.

Catechesis: A Worthy Word and Deed

Catechesis comes from a Greek word, the root of which also was used by the ancients to describe the work of poets, who stood on the edge of the stage and spoke a word that might rouse people's hearts. Catechesis, like the work of the poet, involves all the elements in that description: poetry, edginess, standing in a vulnerable place, risking in order to address for others and for oneself the desires of the heart.

Catechesis "happens" when a person or persons take the risk to stand on the edge. The edge is that

marginal place in which it is possible to participate and yet to observe. From that vantage point the poet both sees and feels the heart of the crowd and attempts to speak a word from the heart. The ancient Hebrew word for heart, *leb*, referred to more than the bodily organ; *leb* is the word used to denote the very center of the self, the source of truth that flowed through the human being like blood through the organ of the heart. By *leb*, the ancients meant that locus of activity and behavior as well as intention, the genesis of all that one does and is. Speaking from the center of the self to the center of another's self is risky work. It requires a level of presence and honesty that leaves the speaker in a vulnerable place. The words spoken by the poet are both essential and elusive; they convey as best they can the truth in the heart of the poet. But words hardly ever capture the full truth; they are the best we can do as humans who want to speak the truth but who are constrained by our own humanity and the limits of language. This is true when we speak words about love or friendship, loyalty or humility, patriotism or pride, anger or desire. Words also fail to capture the complete essence of the revelation of God in Christ. The Christian clings to the words and yet knows that the Word of God in Christ is larger, deeper, and richer than human words. The paradox of standing on the edge of the stage in order to speak a word that will rouse others' hearts is that one can both participate and observe. The poet is a part of the crowd yet apart from the crowd.

Standing on the edge of the stage is both the burden and the consolation of catechetical ministry today. Like the poet, we stand on the edge of the community not just by circumstances or always by desire, but by call. Catechetical ministry is first and foremost a call from God, experienced in the depths of one's heart, with that call coming to us through the ordinary persons and events that invite us to serve. A tap on the shoulder, an insight in the midst of prayer, a plea from a friend to help: ordinary circumstances often mediate an extraordinary call to stand on the edge of the stage. Catechesis is also work—it requires not only effort but learning, not only outreach but disciplined prayer, not only celebration but self-giving. Catechetical ministry is a response to the

call within the *leb*, the center of the human being, to communicate with another. And that is work, hard work but holy work, revealing God to us, even as we hope to make a space for God to be heard through us. Catechetical ministers assume a place in mentoring others in faith that allows them to both experience and observe the community as that community expresses faith.

In what follows I ask the reader to stand on the edge of the stage of the community and to observe with care and empathy the community we seek to serve, the service we have rendered or desire to render, and to access that center of the self from which comes the desire to serve the community in the first place. In what follows I attempt to narrate from the edge of the stage certain features of catechetical ministry to adolescents, teenagers ages 12-18, at this time in the Catholic Church in the United States. I do not claim to do this in any exhaustive way, but as a catalyst for further reflection from that place on the edge where one can see with clarity and longing: clarity about the state of our church and our ministry to adolescents, and longing to excel in service to them so that they might grow in faith.

I do this first, by surveying the terrain, second, by digging a foundation, and third, by offering some guiding principles or questions to others who will design the work of adolescent catechesis in a way that accounts for the terrain and which builds on a firm foundation. The metaphor of building is one that may help us to consider the work that we do in a new light, as a work of pastoral theology.

Stepping to the Edge and Noticing: A Work of Pastoral Theology

Catechetical ministry is a form of pastoral theology, because by doing it we engage in critical reflection on the activity of sharing faith. All theology is critical reflection on action. Critical reflection does not involve criticizing so much as analyzing the practices of faith that constitute following Jesus Christ as disciples. Pastoral theology critically reflects on activities of sharing faith, analyzing that function of our intelligence known as communication, the expression of faith that supports communities and their outreach to the world. There are as many ways of communicating

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as there are stars in the sky, and we need to consider how we communicate and the message that we send to adolescents in the words and deeds, processes and structures, and general life of the community. As both participants in and observers of the community, we catechetical ministers serve others and so experience the Gospel in fresh ways ourselves. Two great gains in theology in the last four decades inform the work that we do as catechists whose critical reflection constitutes a pastoral theology. The first concerns theology's conversation partners. The second concerns its deliberate attention to critical reflection.

For centuries, philosophy functioned as the principle conversation partner in dialogue with theology. From the establishment of theology as a discipline in European universities in the middle ages, theology often relied on philosophy as its starting point as well as its constant companion. The insights of twentieth century theologians who became advisors to the bishops at Vatican II also spurred on an interest in other conversation partners, other fields of study that could illumine the practices of faith and the conditions of the world in which that faith is practiced. The social sciences are among the fields that have enriched the theological enterprise in the past forty years. Social scientists can help to report with a certain objectivity and clarity the attitudes and behaviors of people who self-identify as Catholic. Social scientists can describe and illumine the conditions and circumstances for practicing faith, offering new insights to theologians about the very nature of faith as it is lived.

The second gain in theology within Catholic circles in recent years has been found in theologians' attention to "reading" the texts of people's experience in the practices named above. When faith is regarded as an action as much as a thought,

then theologians are obliged to reflect on how people live their faith as well as how they think about their faith. How faith is lived day-to-day, how it takes on flesh and is expressed through hands and feet as well as thoughts—this offers the theologian data, real actions on which to reflect, like other data on which to reflect when faith is expressed in Scripture, sacramental worship, and doctrine. In this sense theologians are expanding the meaning of the word "text" to exhort us to "read" and to be attentive to people and their practices, examining the meaning and intention of those actions that communicate faith.

Perhaps this is why theologians esteem the social sciences as a partner in the theological enterprise, and the partnership represents an important gain for theology. One could argue that there are many other gains in Catholic theology in the last forty years that could inform our pastoral theological project in service to youth. Among the gains, it is easy to list the inclusion of lay persons and their perspective in theology, the voices of women as well as men, the perspectives of people and cultures formerly underrepresented in the church. But all these are illumined by the conversation partner of the social sciences and the theologian's attention to the people and the practices—the performative elements of faith. In this sense the "doing" of faith through these performative elements amplifies and informs the creeds or sacred texts, the history or the laws of a community, and the performative elements contribute to what constitutes the "content" of faith. Social sciences also help us to widen the theological circle beyond the professional theologians and the official public ministers. The social sciences help sharpen our focus on the people who are at the heart of the faith community, in order to understand and esteem their perspective, and so to make the pastoral life of the church clearer to those who seek to analyze it in order to serve it more effectively. Adopting this perspective, we turn to the work of surveying the terrain in which we work; with the aid of social sciences, we come to understand the context for the ministry that is both a task and a gift for those who serve adolescents.

Surveying the Landscape of the Field Where We Labor: Considerations from the Social Sciences

Pastoral theologians often begin a theological project by describing the contours of the present context for doing theology. How can we come to understand the terrain and its conditions for adolescent catechesis at this time in the history of the United States of America? How do the contours of the religious landscape, in general terms, offer the ground on which to build catechetical efforts on behalf of today's teenagers? How can these insights help to define limits as well as conditions that curtail the practices of sharing faith among the teenagers in the United States? Let us turn to a summary of some of studies conducted by social scientists, in order to understand the terrain in which we minister to adolescents.

The U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov) informs our discussion by showing that teenagers live in an America that is older, ethnically more diverse, and religiously more varied and fluid than it was a hundred years ago. Americans have associated the age of sixty-five with retirement, even though many people today work for decades beyond that age. Those who are older than age sixty-five comprise thirteen percent of the nation's population; in 1900 this group made up only four percent of the people of the nation. It is well known that people live longer because of advancements in medicine and science.

Still, our nation is not a leader in health. The United States ranks fifteenth in the world for its life expectancy, trailing the leader, Hong Kong, and many other nations, including Japan, Australia and Canada. Social scientists often note that the "graying" of America will have lasting effects on the young. The statistics suggest that as elders live longer but with more complex and expensive health challenges, they will require greater attention from their middle aged children, more than was required in previous generations. The burning issue of access to health care and its attendant financial costs only complicate this matter for tomorrow's adults.

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If America's population has more gray hair, it should be noted that its skin is also more colorful. America's teenagers live in a racially and ethnically diverse America where one third of the population consists of people of color. While the nation's Americans still reflect the first wave of European immigration—sixty-eight percent of the nation is of European descent—the United States is increasingly diverse. Its newest arrivals and its younger members come from the Hispanic and Asian worlds. Hispanics comprise thirteen percent of the overall population of the nation; of these, two-thirds trace their roots to Mexico. (Note that the term Hispanic is employed by the U.S. Census Bureau, to denote persons from a variety of nations who may hold Spanish language in common.) Asian Americans comprise four percent of the U.S. population, with the largest number (twenty-four percent of Asians) tracing ancestry to China, though others come from traditionally Catholic nations (the Philippines—eighteen percent and Vietnam—eleven percent are among them). Many of these immigrants, like those of the first wave, came to the United States for economic opportunity, though some have come to escape war or persecution in their homeland. And the twelve percent African American population tells a story of arrival in the United States for markedly different reasons that shape a different perspective. Their ancestors did not choose to come to America, but rather were forcibly taken to America in the bowels of slave ships.

If the United States that teens inhabit and inherit is older and more colorful, then it is also more religiously diverse and religiously fluid. Recently the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released the "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" (Pew Study)

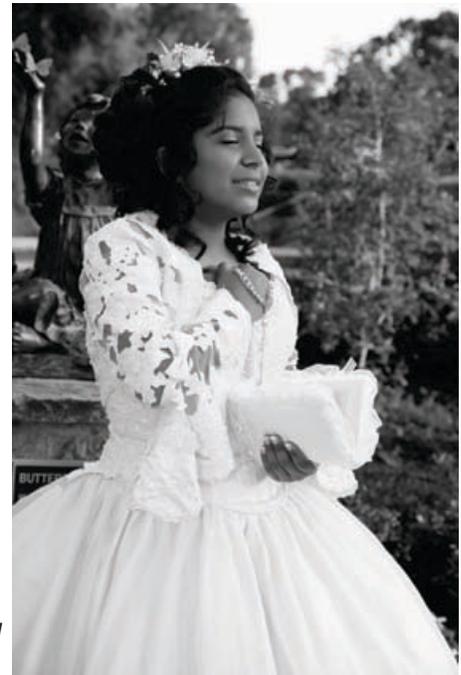
and concluded that twenty-eight percent of American adults (over age eighteen) have left the faith in which they were raised; some of these for a different faith, others for no organized religion at all. (See the Pew Forum statistics at www.religions.pewforum.org.) The number of adults who self-identify as unaffiliated with any faith is 16.1%, nearly double the per cent of those who were not affiliated with any religion as children. This traditionally Protestant nation is now fifty-one percent Protestant (when all Protestant churches are taken together). Of these the largest group (when taken together) is the collective number of Evangelical Protestants at 26.3% of America's adults. Catholics make up the largest single group of Christians in the nation at 23.9%. Some of the most interesting and attention-grabbing statistics of the Pew Forum Study concern Catholics, who have experienced the greatest net losses in members. Nearly one-third of all American adults (thirty-one percent) were raised Catholic, but less than one-fourth (twenty-four percent) describe themselves as Catholic now.² When factoring in immigration, which is the greatest source of newly injected numbers of Catholics in the United States, it is clear that an alarming number of adults born in the U.S. have left the Catholic Church in which they were raised. The actual place that Catholicism occupies in the lives of these Catholics is harder to measure and understand. The Pew Study reports that one adult American in ten is a former Catholic, a statistic that troubles anyone who desires to understand the role that a church can play in the formation of religious individuals and the society as a whole. It is easy to imagine that this statistic impacts the teens who are members of the households of the ten percent former Catholics.

The Hispanic population of the United States is approximately thirteen percent, a significant and growing population in the nation and in the Catholic church. The Pew Study notes that about fifty-eight percent of the Hispanic population of the U.S. is Catholic. However, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) of Georgetown University challenges Pew's findings on that number, concluding that sixty-eight percent is a more accurate statistic.³ In many aspects the Pew Study statistics of 2007 concur

with the earlier (2003) findings of CARA regarding Americans' patterns of switching or leaving organized religion (www.cara.georgetown.edu). CARA's 2008 study, *The Impact of Switching and Secularization on the Estimated Size of the U.S. Adult Catholic*

Population, differs with Pew's statistic on the U.S. population that was raised Catholic but no longer identify as such (CARA at 8.1%, and Pew at 10.1%).

One cannot help but to infer from the Pew Forum Study that for many Americans, religion functions as a means, not as an end to the spiritual "search" that Americans undertake. Affiliation with a particular faith community or church is not lifelong for 28% of American adults. While the CARA statistics slightly temper those of Pew, it is still clear that American Catholic teens live in households on a landscape that hosts shifting patterns of religious affiliation, with a significant number of persons opting out of organized religion. Religion can be abused by people for their own selfish ends, but one must ask whether every instance of changing affiliation or leaving the faith of one's childhood results from selfish pursuit or from genuine prayer. It is fair to ponder whether this movement from one church or religion to another derives from a tendency to "shop" for religious experience, or whether it is the result of real discernment, proceeding from the recognition that one is not at home and needs to find that home.



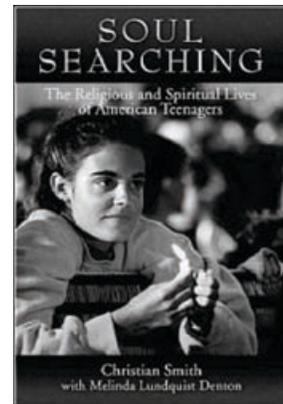
Within the adult Catholic world of those who participate in Catholicism, the terrain is also varied. William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge and Katherine Meyer studied three generations of Catholics whom they describe in terms of the impact of the Second Vatican Council—they called them the “pre-Vatican II, Vatican II and post-Vatican II” generations. They bear some similarities but several essential differences in their approaches to Catholic identity and especially Catholic morality. Catholic adults do not all agree on how to resolve the issues that cause Catholic consternation: Divorce and remarriage of Catholics, the role of women in the church, the place and weight of magisterial teachings in determining one’s sexual and medical ethical decisions and behaviors.⁴

The work of adolescent catechesis begins by surveying the terrain of their home experience of religion and the factors that draw some teens and adults to lifelong affiliation with one particular faith community, as well as those factors that shape an “American approach” to religion that is, for a significant slice of the American adult population, quite fluid and open-ended. Any effort such as the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis will be both energized and constrained by the realities of this landscape. Many teens live in multi-religious households; others live in religiously nonaffiliated ones. Still others, whose stories are harder to capture in formal studies, live not at home but in flux, due to shifting patterns, migrant worker status, substance abuse, or a parent’s job change or job loss. Evangelization outreach has never been more relevant or needed, yet we must start with the population that we can find. We need to examine the attitudes and practices of those teens who do participate in religion.

Soul Searching about Catholic Teens

The findings of the *National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR)* are especially troubling to Catholic adults; the study has been hailed for its breadth and command of the religious landscape of American teens, and for its clarity and purity in method. The conclusions to the study, summarized in the published text *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, are

indicating: Catholic teens trail most of their peers in their ability to express what they believe and to identify adults around them with whom they would pursue important faith questions. The NSYR investigators note that Catholic teens, as a group, are among those teens in America who need to gain clarity about the content of their faith; they need help to understand what their faith community believes as well as how they might “say” it in their own language. Perhaps even more troubling is the conclusion that Catholic teens display a certain religious apathy that also reflects that of their parents. Parents do little more than “expose” youth to religion. They do not actively “teach” them or expect much growth from their teens in this area—sports, grades, and college acceptances are another matter—but not religion.⁵ Like an atrophied muscle for many teens—Catholics included—their skill in talking about faith remains unexercised and weak. They need to learn to talk about the questions that matter and to correlate those questions to the core beliefs of a faith community. It should be noted (likely coming as no surprise to Catholic readers) that Catholics invest less money and personnel in programs for youth than do other churches.⁶ The authors of *Soul Searching* assert that opportunities matter and make a difference.



“ . . . The greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, activities . . . and opportunities, the more likely teenagers will be religiously engaged and invested.”⁷

The troubling finding that Catholic teens have a hard time naming adults with whom they could discuss faith is more than alarming. It insinuates more about the adults and the infrastructure of Catholic parishes/congregations than about the teens themselves. The unresolved issue of adult formation continues to loom in the background of any discussion of teens, as National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis will need to address the question: *How do teens acquire both the*

confidence and the competence to talk about faith if the adults in their world possess neither? In their “concluding unscientific postscript” the authors of *Soul Searching* rightly pose questions that may not be scientific, but they are both insightful and confirming for many pastoral ministers to youth. These questions concern parent education, financial and personnel commitment to youth formation by churches, the relationship between articulating and believing (does saying it help to know it?), and the primacy of religious practices among teens and the adults who support them.

Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens reflects upon the findings from NSYR with particular emphasis on, and analysis of, the responses of Hispanic teens. These teens were interviewed in the NSYR process (waves 1 and 2) by telephone and personal interview. The essays by several youth ministry leaders contained in *Pathways*, a collection of essays edited by Ken Johnson-Mondragon, illumine the particular needs of Hispanic youth by types. Various authors suggest strategies for reaching out to members of this large and growing cohort of teenagers in the United States. The “types” that Johnson-Mondragon names in the socioreligious demographics of Hispanic teens are related to some categories used in the NSYR, with particular focus on Hispanics. They are:

- identity seekers (40-50% of the population seeking clarity amid cultural transition);
- mainstream movers (20-30% affected by consumerism of the dominant culture);
- immigrant workers (10-20% who require an alternative and accessible set of supports); and
- high risk teens (10-15% who require counseling and other supports to overcome challenges that leave them in the social margins).⁸

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The organizers and animators of the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis seek to probe more deeply the issues beneath the practices that foster effective youth formation in faith for all teens in the U.S. They want to consider ways to enhance and enrich this important ministry. What follows in this essay is one writer’s effort to provoke reflection on, and creative thinking about, the future of adolescent catechesis that NIAC seeks to initiate. I do this by attempting to search the riches of our catechetical tradition for guidance in establishing a foundation for the NIAC efforts. In the next session of this essay, we shed a light on some rich resources from that tradition.

Digging a Foundation: Considerations for Adolescent Catechesis

If we have surveyed the terrain and considered the sociological landscape, then the pastoral theologian next must ask: What are the sources of catechetical wisdom from the tradition, and what are the successful practices that might hint at addressing the needs of American Catholic teenagers? How would the pastoral theologian construct a foundation for a new house, designed with the catechetical needs of youth in mind?

For four decades the official Catholic Church documents on catechesis have named parents as the first catechists, the essential teachers in faith for the young. This teaching is grounded in documents of the Second Vatican Council.⁹

Forty years later, there is a problem with this assertion in light of the religious “landscape” that the Pew Forum, CARA, and others have surveyed. Current studies show that Catholic teens need and desire adults with whom to discuss their faith questions, struggles, and concerns. Yet pastoral efforts to educate parents, the first catechists, get varied amounts of commitment on the part of parishes and schools, and they yield varied results. The principal investigators of the study of youth summarized in *Soul Searching* observe that the parents “get who they are” in the next generation.¹⁰ If the parents are committed to a faith community, so will their teenage children. The opposite is just as predictable. It is not hard to infer that adult catechesis serves youth faith formation. It has a direct effect on adults, but an



equally important one on youth. Still the education of parents will not suffice unless the adults also possess the skills to share their faith with teens.

As we consider the design of the response to this pastoral need, therefore, the report on the catechetical

landscape suggests the need for a *two-part process of educating the adults* in order for them first, to grow in competence about the content of their faith, clarifying for themselves what they believe. The second part of the process demands a second kind of education that builds confidence in adults (both the parents of teens and other adults in the community of faith) that they have the communication skills necessary to share the cause for their hope with another generation. As much as youth catechesis is needed, it cannot overshadow the assertion found in official Catholic documents that adult faith is the goal and norm for catechesis. How might we bring together the concerns of both teens and adults in order to promote intergenerational communication about faith?

This section of our study considers the foundational insights of the adult catechumenate as a starting point for support of adults, and as the first step in initiating an adequate response to support teens' faith. More than any other single success within parish life, the catechumenate, or the RCIA as it is popularly known, has generated enthusiasm among those who seek to join a Catholic community. The RCIA is a theological and liturgical transposition of the ancient process of initiation operative in the first centuries of Christianity. It has exercised great benefit to those already in the Catholic faith community who welcome them. The riches of insight about all catechesis that can be culled from examining the

catechumenate are many, and the indirect results in parish life enrich everyone. Several important insights about catechesis emerge from the nearly four decades of pastoral implementation of the renewed catechumenate:

- It is adult focused, with care for the individual, but community-hosted
- The community is the “sponsor” of each candidate in a very real sense
- The candidate’s decision to become affiliated with the community is ultimately a choice, made in freedom
- The process is more than a discreet program; it entails and enlists the life of the whole community
- The process is intimately connected to the liturgical life as the source and summit of the community’s life
- People who are baptized, anointed, and who share in the Eucharist are just beginning—the process is lifelong. There is commencement to a new way of relating to the community, but people do not “graduate” like they do from school or college

These are but some of the insights that can be considered, insights that the catechumenate, when implemented effectively, can inform and inspire all efforts to catechize. Hence the *General Directory for Catechesis* names the catechumenate as “an inspiration” for all catechesis.¹¹

What are some of the deeper messages that the practices of the catechumenate offer for pastoral ministers? Three benefits that we could consider in greater depth are:

- a warmer welcome and respect for adult lay people, manifested through a genuine esteem for their questions and their experience as a locus of revelation;
- a renewed interest in, and deeper respect for, the Word of God as a foundation for daily spirituality; and
- honed skills in praying aloud (as opposed to saying prayers) and discussing openly one’s faith and faith-related concerns.

These three are among the significant gifts of the catechumenate to Catholic newcomers as well as

to the already-initiated church members. Let us briefly consider each of these and ask how they might inform the formation of adults who want to mentor teens in faith, and how they might directly apply to youth catechesis.

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Questions and Experience Honored

A strength of the catechumenate that is hard to overlook is its welcome of peoples' questions and their past experience. The subtle, fresh, and valuable message that the RCIA process communicates is that ordinary people's past experiences matter. One's life needs to be read like a holy text that helps to reveal God's activity in one's blessed past, in order to be ready to consider God's plan for one's welfare in the future. This allows youth to thoughtfully and prayerfully "recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives . . ." ¹² The stock word that is nearly unavoidable when speaking about the catechumens' lives is the word "journey." The word communicates several important things. The journey metaphor allows for, indeed presumes, that there have been twists and turns in the road of life. Not all of the twists and turns were happy ones yet all were graced. When read in this light, they lead the "reader" to discover an emerging pattern: acceptance of Christ and a commitment to live informed by Christ's paschal mystery makes life meaningful. That acceptance might begin with reflection on the gracious ways of God in one's life—even before one acknowledges these ways as God's—is part of the power of this renewed version of the ancient catechumenate.

If human experience and the questions that people bring to the catechumenate are to be transposed for use with parents and teenagers, some questions that we might probe are these:

- The power of the catechumenate appears to be in an area that Catholics as a group did not use to cultivate—welcome of newcomers in

a concerted way. What is the power of the welcome for teenagers as they struggle with the challenges of their lives?

- Are there ways to focus on the parents of teenagers so that their faith questions and their "journey" as parents receive the same honor and attention accorded those in RCIA? What successful practices exist in parishes today from which all parishes and schools might derive instruction or inspiration?
- Are there ways to imagine the role of the Catholic school in shaping the surrounding community so as to reach the adolescents and their related adults who are connected through school but not necessarily through parish?
- If the ultimate goal of adolescent catechesis is to help the young person to move toward mature faith, how can the metaphor of the "journey" inform their reading of the meaning of their lives? How can it invite them to consider the paschal mystery?

A Renewed Appreciation for the Word of God: Foundation for Daily Life

If inquirers' life experience is honored by those who welcome them, then that honor is returned to the Scriptures, the sacred texts of Christianity, the Word of God to be heard and heeded, pondered and applied to daily living. The USCCB document *Renewing the Vision* calls the Catholic Church to "guide young people in the call to holiness by developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by meeting him in the Scriptures . . ." ¹³ Another catechetical "success" of the catechumenate/RCIA is found in the place that Scripture holds in the life of the individual and in that circle of care that hosts the yet-to-be-baptized adult catechumens. Various processes of reflection about the Scriptures and their meaning have fueled the spiritual lives of adults and teenagers through other processes inspired by the catechumenate. These come from both informal parish and school faculty faith sharing groups, and more formally articulated programs such as RENEW, GIFT (Growing in Faith Together), parish-based prayer groups of the charismatic renewal, Generations of Faith, FIRE (Family Intergenerational Religious Education), to name a few. Scripture also holds the foundational place in the parish-wide effort to engage in "whole

Various processes of reflection about the Scriptures and their meaning have fueled the spiritual lives of adults and teenagers through other processes inspired by the catechumenate.

community catechesis” and to enshrine the Gospel of the week as central to the life of the community (for example, when parishes adopt a “question of the week” based in the Gospel). These efforts hinge on the insight of the catechumenate that the real “sponsor” or “agent” who represents and welcomes the newcomer is the whole community. That community may have particular representatives, but that does not exonerate the community from the responsibility of being the privileged context for growth in faith.

In addition to these parish-based efforts, there are other unnamed and unofficial efforts that are home based and others that are found in Catholic schools or other Catholic institutions. Catholic school faculty members and parents gather in early mornings or at lunch time in school chapels and churches across the land, in order to read the Bible and to consider its meaning for them. Hospital chaplains or business people who gather at lunchtime (at a church or restaurant) can consider the Bible and its immediate meaning for their lives. Using the Word of God as a source for daily spirituality is a growth point for Catholics, certainly for older Catholics.

The focus on adult faith that is presumed here is worth noting: The adults are convened but not lectured to, they are welcome to speak and not just listen, and the “content” of the tradition as related in Scripture must be put in the context of their experience. Still a challenge in the catechumenate is furnishing adults with the skills to interpret the Scriptures in both a historical and theological context. In adolescent catechesis the use of the Scriptures as a source for learning and prayer may seem more natural and yet it also calls for an appropriate level of engagement with the historical background to the formation of the Scriptures, the intention of the evangelists communicated through the gospels, and the intellectual engagement with the theological

content of Christian faith. Both adults and adolescents require capable guides who know and understand the content of the Scriptures and can relate them to the teaching of the church and the experience of the learners.

Honed Skills for Praying and Discussing Faith

The catechumenate has taught Catholic adults some behaviors that previously were not popular among Catholics. Catholics of previous generations were more skilled in saying prayers than in praying aloud in their own words (diverting from a printed or memorized text), a style of prayer not exercised often, even by priests. Since the Second Vatican Council and the renewal of the catechumenate, it is possible to make the claim that catechumens are not saying prayers so much as they are praying, and in the catechumenate process it is easier than previously imagined to have Catholics talk about what they believe. This new and tentative, at times awkward Catholic behavior, signals an important gain in catechesis. The gain is found in the ancient formula: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. A Catholic theological maxim states that the *lex orandi* (the way of prayer) gives way to the *lex credendi* (the way of belief); the words one says have a meaning that must then be explained. There is a clarifying and purifying factor at work whenever a community seeks to make sense of the way of prayer. The catechumenate is not alone in fostering this skill among adult Catholics. Today members of Catholic prayer groups of various kinds gather and pray in their own words. These groups are not all the same in their theological or spiritual emphases, but they share in common the behavior that impels them from praying to reflecting theologically. This signals a great gain in adult catechesis.

Among adolescents the same phenomenon occurs through prayer groups that are either continuous (parish or school prayer groups) or episodic events (retreats, world youth days, teen congresses and conventions, etc.) The gains in the past forty years in this regard cannot be underestimated. The unfortunate news is that these activities have not necessarily helped Catholics to grow in confidence or competence in speaking outside the circle, either to their age group peers or to those of another generation. “Talk about the church trumps

talk about God when two more Catholics gather,” as one frustrated parish minister in the Midwest region of the nation recently expressed it. In fact, a recent gathering of youth ministers on the west coast of the United States yielded concerns that parents and teens are not as adept at speaking to each other (across age groups) as they are in speaking with their age group peers. Youth catechesis should aim to “develop the biblical and doctrinal literacy of young people . . .”¹⁴ Without this, meaningful communication with peers, much less older generations, will continue to be both difficult and inconsistent.

Thus far we have examined the gifts of the catechumenate and their potential to invigorate both adults and adolescents in their faith formation, with a focus on much needed communication between the generations. However the limits of the catechumenate also deserve to be named honestly, because present in the current practice of youth catechesis lie some strengths typically lacking or underplayed in the catechumenate.

The primacy of service and justice as a practice of discipleship is often healthier among youth than among the adults in the catechumenate. The focus on welcome found in the catechumenate can tend toward a welcome into the walls of the parish and integration into the liturgical life of the community. The catechumens are not always encouraged to do works of service and justice at the outset, nor are these works presented as part of the content of the gospel. The inspiration derived from the catechumenate is real and rich, but it often centers on community sharing, Scripture, and liturgy, and only secondarily and derivatively on the works of service and justice that the Scriptures portray. By contrast, religiously engaged teens regard service and justice as part of the content of Christian faith and are not any more optional than liturgy. The adult Catholic world could learn from the example of teens. The importance of reflecting on service and action in the light of the gospel is a growing edge for youth and adults, an area that often “evangelizes” those within and beyond the community. People who are not likely to worship or attend a church’s events still can see the effects of Christian discipleship

when it is practiced through service and justice in a public forum. In addition, *RTV* suggests a symbiotic relationship in which serving is rooted in faith, but at the same time that service leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation of that faith (*RTV* 38-39). In this sense, service provides a venue for the catechumenate to both practice and further understand the Christian tradition.

The importance of reflecting on service and action in the light of the gospel is a growing edge for youth and adults, an area that often “evangelizes” those within and beyond the community.

Second, because of the nature of the catechumenal process and the relative fluidity of youth activities in parishes, it is possible for youth to do more outreach and invitation to their curious peers. If peers immediately or quickly respond they become part of the youth activities. The catechumenate can be constrained by its interpreters to follow a rigid calendar and a hard and fast set of criteria that leave adults feeling tentative and barely a part of the community.

Still what we have seen in the inspiration of the catechumenate needs to be probed more deeply for the principles at work beneath the practices, and to ask ourselves how these may inform the present discomfort with, and hopes for, youth catechesis. We turn to these design principles in the next section.

Principles of Design Culled from the Catechetical Tradition

In this section we consider principles of design that could inform plans for adolescent catechesis; specifically, we do this by considering three principles that emerge from a study of our catechetical tradition and practice: a theological principle, a catechetical principle, and an ecclesiological principle.

A Theological Principle for Design: Respecting Two Aspects of Faith

The catechumenate has successfully convinced its participants (and the larger community that takes it seriously) of the importance of the two

aspects of faith that have been long-affirmed by the Catholic theological tradition. Catholic theology distinguishes between the *fides qua* and the *fides quae* of faith. These two Latin phrases refer to faith as the act of trust, our response to God's grace (*fides qua*), and the content of the faith, the object of our trusting (*fides quae*). Faith in the first sense—*fides qua*—is that mysterious gift that allows one to trust in God in the first place—the capacity by which one gives oneself in love to the power of God beyond understanding. This aspect of faith as trust (*fides qua*) is seen in clear light from the successful practices in the catechumenate that call the individuals to reflect on their lives and the patterns and invitations that emerge from them. The catechetical sessions in which people reflect on the Word of God in light of their own “journey” effectively communicate the connection between Christian salvation history on the one hand, and the individual's blessed history in the other. The gift of faith is precisely that; the response that could not be made by anyone save but for God's gracious invitation. But there is another aspect of faith as well.

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Walking hand in hand in Catholic theological tradition with the *fides qua* aspect of faith is the *fides quae* aspect of faith—this is the second aspect, referring to the object or content of belief, that which we believe and know by faith to be true. Christian faith (*fides quae*) is summarized and recapitulated in the Creed of the church and in the theological tradition that elaborates it. This is why the Creed is as important to both the ancient catechumenate as practiced in Jerusalem, and the contemporary transposition, the renewed catechumenate (RCIA) of the last thirty-five years. The Creed is the summary of the entire story of salvation history, the recapitulation of the revelation of God in unity and Trinity, the God who becomes one with us in Jesus Christ and yet who

is Mystery in Trinity. The catechumens “receive” the Creed as the symbol (the sacrament) of God's great deeds in history and God's continuing activity in the world. While the Creed is not the entire story, it symbolizes and summarizes that story. Its recitation is an action of solidarity with the communion of saints who precede us and the community of believers with whom we walk in faith.

A Catechetical Principle: Promoting Two Ways of Knowing Christ

Two aspects of the life of faith correspond to the two ways that people come to know God in Christ. These two aspects correspond roughly to the two verbs in Spanish for “to know.” The first, *saber*, refers to knowledge of facts, cognitive understanding. The second aspect of knowledge, in Spanish, *conocer*, refers to knowing a person, an intimate connection with the intricacies of personality and human spirit. The second sense of knowledge cannot thrive without the first. One needs to know about (*saber*) the person in order to move more deeply into knowing (*conocer*) the intricacies of a personality and to claim that person as a friend.

So the first sense of knowledge—*saber*—is necessary and good, but it does not guarantee the second (*conocer*). Cognitive knowledge is essential and beneficial, but it will not necessarily lead beyond *saber* to *conocer*, from data-knowledge to personal knowledge, familiarity, and love. The *General Directory for Catechesis* describes discipleship as a “permanent commitment to think like him [Jesus], to judge like him, and to live as he lived.”¹⁵ Knowledge of the disciple is two-pronged. This is where the tension in Catholic religious education in the United States has resided for more than a century.

In a former era, widely associated with the “Baltimore Catechism,” the focus on knowledge and faith were clearly placed on cognitive knowledge of “the faith” (*fides quae*). Some current commentators in Catholicism lament the passing of this era when, as they tell it, “people knew the faith.” But the question and answer era is not likely to inform postmodern teenagers, at least not in the majority of the teen population. The

assumption in the Baltimore Catechism approach is that the learners' *clear (and often identical) articulation of words about the faith* denoted their knowledge of the content of the faith. This is a logical leap not supported by the data about pre-Vatican II Catholics studied by D'Antonio and others. Why would some older adults (age 65 +) be former Catholics today if they had so clearly learned to articulate their belief during the pre-Vatican II era? There is a tendency to assume that a clear and unambiguous articulation ensured adherence; that is, if people could say the right thing they would do the right thing. This constitutes a second enormous leap, that is, that knowing leads to acting. A further leap of logic is found in the notion that knowing "the faith" (*fides quae*) would lead eventually to "having faith" (*fides qua*) as an intimate relationship between the disciple and the Lord. If this were true then it would follow that instruction causes or at least generates belief, with knowledge of doctrine sealing and supporting the relational knowing that sustains the learner over the course of a lifetime. People would then do what they learned in theory to be right. If only life (and catechesis) was so simple.

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The era now passed of "instruction in the faith" through clear articulation of answers to questions was both consoling and iconic to those who look over their shoulder in hope of its return. It was consoling at the time and it continues to console many who look back, because the formulas were clear, the instruction was measurable, and the discussions were controlled. Formulas for understanding "the faith" in a question and answer format (the format of the Baltimore Catechism) meant it was possible for the instructor (not yet called a catechist) to measure students' progress and to assume a framework for the class session that, with adherence to the plan, would not deviate from the topic at hand. The topic was treated in summary form in the memorized

answer to the question or questions in a section of the chapter. The touted success of this way of instruction lay in the clarity of the answer and the uniformity of the expression by the students. It bred a certain sense of equality, as students "graduated" from the parish program or Catholic school knowing the same answer no matter their personality, culture, intelligence, or other factors. The era was and remains iconic insofar as it serves to represent a pristine and clear scenario about membership in a community of faith that was a bulwark against any forces that might threaten it. The explicit concern of the era was on knowing the faith (*fides quae*).

The contemporary catechetical movement since Vatican II has developed in such a way that the *fides qua* (faith as act of trust in response to God's work in us) has resumed its rightful place in the vision of faith formation. The catechumenate has taught Catholics that faith is a gift and a relationship that is serious but free and voluntary. A relationship cannot be mandated by fear (of punishment, or embarrassment, or of going to hell, or of any other consequence). Given the legacy of the contemporary movement, and Catholic generational differences and the attitudes of Catholic youth, our design for the future must engage the hearts and minds of adults and teens in ways that promote both aspects of knowing and both dimensions of faith. *Real situations in which real people talk to each other and engage the theological tradition of Catholicism in order to support spiritual growth over a lifetime: this is the goal and also the moving target of catechetical ministry to youth and the adults who love them.* The effective practices hold in unity, rather than in competition, these two theological aspects of faith and the two catechetical dimensions of knowing.

An Ecclesiological Principle: Imagining Family and Home as Church

One of Pope John Paul's gifts to the church was his descriptions, at once steady and provocative, about the family as the "domestic church." Although this phrase can be found in a Vatican II document,¹⁶ it was Pope John Paul II who made the term "domestic church" a memorable feature of his teaching. John Paul imagined the gospel as such an organic reality pervading all of life that

he reminded us as a church that the church exists outside church buildings. He taught us that we ought to promote a church that is vibrant because, from the time we wake up until we leave our homes, there is a mission to share faith with one another under the same roof, sometimes in words and more often through example, just as there is a mission beyond the walls of one's home to do the same. And at the end of the day the vocation of every baptized Christian is to live in such a way that breaking bread with one's family causes us to recall the gift of the Eucharist, that conversations of care remind us that family interactions anoint us, heal us of hurts, sign us in faith and love, give us hope to go forth and witness to the world come morning. In other words, Pope John Paul taught us that faith, like charity, begins at home. Thus, the humble, yet critical responsibility of youth ministers is to be "partners with parents in developing the faith life of their adolescent children."¹⁷

The successes of the catechumenate have been real, but not always easily translated into the domestic church that the pope imagined. It appears that Catholics have an easier time in the circle of the catechumenate (or any other structured faith sharing group among one's age peers) than in the comfort of their homes. The troubling findings published in *Soul Searching* tell us that parents and other adults are in short supply to teach their teens the kind of skills presumed as successes in the catechumenate, namely, to speak to God and of God in ordinary language. And how do people move from talking about their faith to analyzing it? If adult faith is the goal then surely people need basic data and skills to research their questions, pursue their interests and widen and deepen their knowledge base, even as they grow comfortable in speaking to and of God.

People who do not know the tradition do not hold it in high esteem. Those who esteem it may not be able to communicate it. While adults self-report great changes in their lives (switching or leaving organized religion) this is not true of teens:

" . . . the character of teenage religiosity is extraordinarily conventional. The vast majority

of U.S. teens are not alienated or rebellious when it comes to religious involvement. Most are quite content to follow in their parents' footsteps."¹⁸



While NSYR focused on teens, any reader of it is quick to conclude that we cannot serve the adolescents alone and expect that the Catholic Church will be healthier. The character of adult religiosity in the U.S. is quite different from that of teens, as both Pew Forum and CARA have shown. The Catholic focus on children and youth, a hallmark of the pre-Vatican II era, dies hard in the imaginations of some leaders, policies, and practices. And this occurs despite rhetoric from the church's official documents on catechesis placing priority on adults. The consequences of singularly focusing on children and youth in order to serve them are well known. The consequences visit every generation of Catholic youth including the current one, whose members cannot identify adults with whom they would be able to discuss their faith questions. The USCCB insists that we "incorporate young people fully into all aspects of church life . . ." ¹⁹ In order to do this, adults must be willing and able to engage young people's questions and stories. Adolescent catechesis carries the potential to form prayerful teenagers who are not afraid to speak to God and of God in front of their family members. Appealing to their sense of independence and their quest for freedom, perhaps the adolescents can be formed in order to form the adults in those skills that they have missed, things that embarrass or overwhelm them. Leadership roles in prayer and simple sharing in the home may be in the hands of the young before these skills are embraced by their elders. But who better than their children

could influence them to go where they have not gone before, and to recognize themselves as the domestic church?

Structural and Infrastructural Factors that Can Support the Design

In the previous section of this essay I have identified three principles that can inform the design of adolescent catechesis as the National Initiative forms plans and turns plans into realities. But in order to translate concepts into actions that can be implemented, it is essential to account for some of the structural features that can either hinder or help the project. I offer only two, recognizing that the work of National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis will identify many others.

The first concerns a structural support in finances. The second concerns an attitudinal adjustment that will enable structural expansion so that ministries flourish.

Financial Supports for Education and Salary

At this juncture in catechetical practice it is fair to ask whether the church's leaders and members value the Catholic tradition enough to support the ministers who share it with the young. Specifically, will we be willing to educate and justly compensate catechetical and youth ministry leaders or will we merely tolerate them? Catechesis "on the cheap" is neither viable nor just, but it is widespread. A revealing statistic from NSYR is that only twenty-one percent of Catholic youth attend a parish that employs a full-time youth minister.²⁰ The financial crisis in many sectors of the U.S. Catholic Church, spawned by the sex abuse scandal, has occupied attention and has drained resources. It also can, in some instances, be used as an excuse to turn full-time positions into part-time ones, to avoid fairly compensating lay ecclesial ministers, and to swerve around planning and paying for the

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education of those who will minister to youth. In dodging responsibility for educating lay ministers of every kind, we avoid learning from our own tradition. But we do not escape the consequences of poorly educated ministers and the toll that such neglect exacts upon the people of God.

We could learn a lot from our past. The Council of Trent established the seminary system, a system for the preparation of Catholic ministers at a time in history when abuses ran rampant and the church was experiencing profound upheaval. The Council fathers sought to mandate a system of education so that, whether rich or poor, previously educated or not, all the church's ministers would receive theological education as

a major component of their overall formation. The people of God would benefit, especially at a time when the church's credibility was in question. This must have appeared as an extravagance in its time; surely the urgent pastoral demands must have seemed enormous then as

they seem now. The leaders at Trent placed the important before the urgent, and planned for the long view of history and the care of the people. The seminary system, while not perfect, was a gift to the church, ensuring that the servants who lead are qualified and knowledgeable. As a result of actions taken at Trent, the people of God received ministers who were better prepared than those in the past, men who would need to give time and effort for a longer but worthwhile education. Those men were financially, emotionally, and spiritually supported by the church's people and the church's leaders. There are lessons in history for today.

Today's Catholic ministers are prepared in places beyond seminaries exclusively, often working toward master's degrees at Catholic universities. Many of these ministers, while working full-

time for the church, are married women and men raising families. They are, according to the statistics of national organizations that support them, many more females than males, particularly in catechetical ministries.²¹ They need theological education that is grounded and sound, delivered in ways that make sense for adults who live full lives, juggling family and ministry commitments. They generally are not preparing to minister. Rather, they already are doing so. Statistics on the education of these lay ministers are encouraging, as thousands of ministers pay for their own theological education in order to know, understand, and interpret the tradition for today's learners. Because of this encouraging news, these stark questions must be faced honestly and with courage: Does the church really want them to be educated, and will the church financially and emotionally support their education? What policies and structures can be established that will serve lay ministers' education in a manner analogous to the seminary system that has helped to educate ordained ministers?

Another challenge concerns the fair compensation of lay ministers. Even if the people and the clergy want educated and professional full-time lay ministers, they may not want to provide them with salaries that are commensurate with the cost of housing, feeding, and supporting a priest in a lighted, heated rectory. We must wonder whether, and hope that, ministers will be compensated so that there is a pool of qualified and experienced ministry leaders who know the tradition and can minister effectively. This hope looms large for a variety of ministries, but it is particularly pressing for catechetical ministry. Will lay people continue to work for low pay, or will they leave and create a revolving door effect in the leadership ministries in the church? These questions concerning financial structure must be considered and addressed in crafting any plan to support adolescent catechesis for the long haul.



Attitudinal Adjustment Among Ministers: Rejecting Market Competition in Favor of Structural Collaboration

A second item that can aid the structural support of any plan is the attitudinal shift required for collaboration to flourish. Like apple pie, the term collaboration seems both wonderful and achievable, especially in Catholic ministry circles. But achieving it takes work and humility, and the courage to swim against the American cultural tide of consumerism. One feature of consumerism that has seduced the American psyche is market competition. American Catholic ministers can fall prey to this as well. In a rush to justify the work that they do, people can become overly concerned about numbers and winning. For example, an inquiry as innocent as "How was the parish retreat?" yields an answer such as this: "It was great—even more people attended than last year." While the peoples' response is always heartening, an undue focus on raw numbers ("How much?! How many?!") can become the measure for success in the same way that winning can be measured by "beating" someone else. Sadly, neighboring parishes still compete for the same people to attend programs that were designed to serve, not to win. Ministers can become possessive of parish or school spaces, or time slots, or resources that are part of a larger pool serving a larger vision and a wider world than their own ministry. If teens are to be served in creative ways, and if teens respond positively to increased opportunities for formation, then the message is clear. The spiritual task of all ministers is to reject the market competition that blocks or undercuts real collaboration between ministers, between parishes, and between parishes and schools. If youth ministers are to encourage a community life that is, as *RTV* puts it, "gospel-based," then their vision must be larger than their own youth group, parish, or school.²² They must encourage students to see the church in a much broader context, and collaborative programming can promote this concept. That pastoral leaders can promote collaboration by rejecting the kind of market competition talk that masks itself as a pursuit of excellence, when really it signals a pursuit of winning at other ministers' (and ministries' and parishes') expense. Leaders can reward collaboration rather than measure success by the turnout that trumps the neighboring

school or parish, or the “competing” ministry. They can prize creativity over efficiency and cleanliness, praising efforts to think broadly about how to serve youth. If they do not promote collaboration, ultimately the teens lose.

A Conclusion and a Metaphor: Toward Building Something New

The well-known song by the liturgical musician and composer Marty Haugen has found its way into many Catholic churches, and its lyrics have helped to shape Catholic thinking about the goals of a healthy faith community:

Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live, a place where saints
and children tell how hearts learn to forgive
. . . .

Let us build a house where prophets speak
and words are strong and true, where all
God’s children dare to seek to dream God’s
reign anew . . .

Let us build a house where love is found in
water, wine and wheat, a banquet hall on
holy ground where peace and justice meet .
. .

Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone to heal and
strengthen, serve and teach, and live the
Word they’ve known . . .

Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard and loved and
treasured, taught and claimed as words
within the Word . . .

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are
welcome in this place.

(Marty Haugen, *All Are Welcome* ©1995 GIA Publications. Used with permission.)

In my opinion, the genius of the song is in its ability to welcome people into worship and to produce in the assembly a “mood” of welcome that it prays through its lyrics. The lyrics are worthy of reflection in this context, because they recapitulate the core insights that the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis upholds in its work on behalf of teens. The animators of NIAC aspire to the work of imagining and then constructing supports and structures for catechesis into the future. Haugen’s lyrics and the NIAC project have contributed to my thinking about catechesis as a process of “building a house” that will host and support the faith of the young and the adults who love them. In this essay I have suggested that the work prior to building involves surveying the landscape, digging a foundation, and extracting principles from the tradition that can aid us in designing a work. The first section of this essay reflected on the task of the catechist as poet and participant observer in a community of faith.

The second section considered the religious landscape of American Catholics in select aspects that might bear influence on the present state and future design of adolescent catechesis. The third and fourth sections considered some of the foundational insights on which catechetical and youth ministry leaders could build a solid and interesting future for catechesis, by attending to design principles that emerge from our heritage. The fifth section briefly named structural and infrastructural factors that could aid ministry and thereby serve youth. Each of these sections represents important aspects of catechetical ministry that merit further reflection and development, not possible in this brief paper. But each leads us toward the task of building. In my concluding remarks I offer the metaphor drawn from Haugen’s song and ask the reader to consider the intent of NIAC, to initiate something new for adolescent catechesis.

If catechesis were something like the process of building a house, then the challenge before the designers would be first and foremost to design something quite new, and to recognize that in doing so they are being faithful to tradition. They will not be the first to construct something

new. But this time, like all times, is unique in its particular pastoral challenges. It calls for something new. Leaders in catechetical theory and practice have been challenged by the signs of the times to stop remodeling and start building afresh, with a radically new design. This fully appears to be the message we gain through the conversation partners in the social sciences who have helped to teach pastoral theologians about the nature and status of religion in America and about the attitudes and practices of Catholic teens. Social scientists have surveyed the landscape—the controlling metaphor used by the Pew Forum is the “Religious Landscape” of practices and attitudes of Americans. The social scientists have described and catalogued what they see and understand to be the practices and attitudes of Americans regarding religion in general (Pew, CARA), Catholicism in particular (D’Antonio *et al.*), and adolescents ages 12-18 (Smith with Denton; Johnson-Mondragon).

A radical new design can only function well if soil and environmental conditions influence the designers’ choices. A new design for catechesis responds to the demand to see religion as a means rather than an end (Pew) and to respect that there are serious generational differences and levels of commitment within Catholicism.²³ This dual message may trouble the souls of lay and ordained ministers, as well as the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. However, the interesting feature of the social scientists’ reports is that through them the writers seek, within the limits that are possible, to be objective and descriptive rather than prescriptive. Their analysis of the landscape leaves the task of designing and building to others, but it does not mince words about the state of the landscape or the construction challenges ahead. Some catechetical and youth ministry leaders could tend to rail against the culture that produced the conditions for this kind of soil. That would be a mistake. If leaders want to effectively address the culture, it is time to get past rants against it. The culture of postmodern America is a culture of our

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own making. Catholics of the first immigrant wave, and some of the second and third waves, are as much the “producers” of contemporary American life as they are its “consumers.”

To think about something new is not to reject the past. All architecture that is truly new is art, but it does not jettison history. The clean lines of the modernist rely on the classical structures of ancient Greece. The post modern architect’s concern to be one with the earth, even as she may seek to jar us into seeing our disconnections, will need to deal with architectural forebears, if only by negation. Whatever is to be designed for catechesis today, it will at once require bold imagination, respect for history, and faithfulness to abiding principles.

If catechesis were something like the process of building a house, then the architects, engineers, and designers would acknowledge the primary considerations before the secondary ones. They would attend to the electricity that flows through the circuitry and not obsess about the metallic finish on the chandelier. They would stop focusing on the style of the wallpaper or the furniture on the porch, and ask whether the internal structure is sound and the beams can support the floors. Catechetical and youth ministry leaders would focus full attention on the infrastructural issues—the abiding and generally invisible but essential conditions for the house to stand—so that the designers, builders, materials vendors, and the inspectors all know that the structure is sound. A catechetical structure is sound if a community of disciples wants to live there and welcome others into its space, support their presence, and challenge them to serve the world that God loves. Such a community engages in the practices associated with discipleship, offering hospitality and open ears to the newcomers’ questions and empathy toward their concerns. Absent the practices that signal discipleship, and absent the infrastructure to support the growth of all its members, the house might as well be built on sand.

If catechetical leadership were something like designing and building a house, then we would respect the styles of houses that dot the land, glorying in the variety rather than merely tolerating it. We would prefer uniqueness of style to uniformity of appearance. We would refrain from calling the design review board or the local style police in order to complain that the next door neighbor does not live in a truly worthy or good house. If catechesis were a house we would prize the Victorian Ladies, the Craftsmen, the English Tudors, and the Monterey Colonials, but we would understand that they are not all appropriate for all climates and conditions. In acknowledging the sometimes dizzying differences among contexts, cultures, and community needs, we would welcome innovation and esteem creativity in catechesis, using as the occupancy permit the sole criterion that this structure is faithful to the gospel and the tradition of the church.

Houses in various regions of the country or even within the same city or town might appear distinct from each other because these houses would be built by the people who inhabit them, maintain them, and pass them on to

others. The role of culture (postmodernity and contemporary culture in general) and the riches of particular ethnic cultures would matter from the very start, long before groundbreaking for any new catechetical construction. Taking our lead from the successes of the catechumenate, leaders in parishes, communities, and schools would note with delight rather than resignation that some cultures prize placement of the important rooms in one spot while others would place them in another. The USCCB, while reflecting upon their three proposed goals for youth catechesis (discipleship, community, and spiritual growth), have “learned that no one strategy, activity, or program is adequate . . .”²⁴

We would note that various definitions of home abide in the hearts of people, and these seem to run a full range based in aesthetics, culture, and

particular needs. But we would also note, with gladness and energy, that having a place to call home is an eternal value that transcends ethnic cultural distinctions and even history. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee,” prayed Saint Augustine of Hippo, bishop and catechetical leader. The gentle and constant work of catechesis impels us to respect the homes that provide way stations on the journey toward God. Finding inspiration in the catechumenate and the contemporary catechetical movement it represents, leaders would design with differences in mind, and would generate enthusiasm for catechesis as a work of the whole community, aimed at all ages but privileging the adults who will support the faith of the young.

The teenagers’ room always looks different from the other rooms in the house. That room is, by its very nature and that of its occupants, a bit offbeat and often messy.

The challenge for those who host teens in the house is to strike the balance between art and engineering, by offering both the freedom and the structure that are necessary, so that the adolescent inhabitants can proudly call it home.

To the untrained eye, the room may appear cluttered, confused in its design concept, and perhaps even off-putting to the adult. But growth is occurring in the very conditions that may look to the outsider as odd. The challenge for

those who host teens in the house is to strike the balance between art and engineering, by offering both the freedom and the structure that are necessary, so that the adolescent inhabitants can proudly call it home. Catechesis involves an undeniable exercise of freedom, without which it is not real catechesis. One sure route to catechetical failure is to deny or condemn the freedom of adolescents, or to underestimate their intelligence or ability to host complexity. But equally important is to ask each adolescent to reach beyond one’s perceived potential and so begin to experience possibilities and worlds beyond the comfort of home. Such reaching can only be coached by those who have reached before. In addition, such reaching must be accompanied by an appropriate structure that offers perimeters for definition as well as comfort

to the adolescent, who craves structure as much as freedom.

If catechesis were like a house then we would prize the talent that it takes to make a livable house and a loveable home. There would be different gifts but the same project, different roles but the same site, with respect for all the roles and the people whose talents enhance them. The people who sand the floors and the workers who wash them would be equally esteemed as those who designed them or oversaw their installation. Each one would be as important to the project as the other. And there would be a just and fair wage for the workers who give their time and talent to the professional coordination of such intricate design and construction. The education of the professionals would be regarded as an investment in the present health and creative future of the structures that support the whole community in its task to welcome people into the home that is much more than a house.

In appealing to adults to take up the tasks of whole community learning and praying, justice-making and serving, welcoming, worshipping, and sending forth for mission, there would be a palpable abiding respect for the complexity of home building. Anyone who has ever maintained a home knows that it is a lifelong project. Move-in day does not terminate the building process—it continues as long as people take up residence. Lifelong and life-wide catechesis would not be a suspect idea; it would be the core assumption on which all creative design hinges. It would provide the needed conditions for teenagers' faith to flourish.

Jesus' parable about house construction takes us aback by its starkness. It is so clear to Jesus that the prior conditions for building require as much attention—and always at the outset—as the end



design. Those who build on rock find that the structure can withstand the challenges of environment and history; those who build on sand live to regret their initial speed and inattention to the landscape, the essential ground on which they had hoped the house might stand. *RTV* uses the term “comprehensive framework” to describe their vision of youth ministry, suggesting that any program should be working within a larger, whole Church based context.²⁵

Catechesis is not exactly like building a house. Throughout this reflection house building has functioned as a metaphor. We humans are complicated creatures who can abstract from the specific and move to the general. We can imagine several items at once and place them alongside each other in order to illumine their meaning. We can play with these metaphors in our mind without forgetting that the metaphors are metaphors—they illumine reality but they are not the sum total of reality. Metaphors are the foundation of all stories, inviting us into that chamber in the human soul where catechesis takes place; a word is spoken (like poets do), a word that will rouse hearts. But such a human word, if it really is borne of the Word, challenges us to conversion, to new ways of seeing and being. Describing metaphors by employing the metaphor of trains, Terrence W. Tilley observes:

Metaphors are locomotives of meaning. They bear the freight of insight from place to place. They roll into the settled cities of our ideas, blasting their horns to announce the new arrival, shining their headlights to dazzle the citizens. The arrival of a powerful metaphor alters the geography of our thoughts and forces us to redraw our conceptual maps.²⁶

Catechetical and youth ministry leaders need to be intellectually grounded and catechetically nimble enough to know the tradition and to interpret it afresh in new metaphors. Effective homilists do this. So do effective teachers of every subject, leading their students from the known to the unknown, trying an array of metaphors to show what the new thing/insight/idea is “like.” Notice that Jesus never defined the kingdom of God. He offered metaphors to describe it: a merchant in search of fine pearls, a widow who finds a lost coin, a mustard seed.

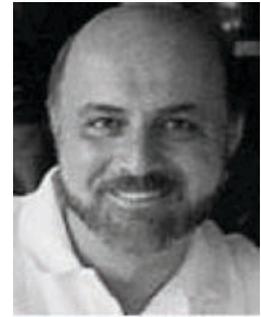
Effective preachers and teachers know that people learn because their imagination has been sparked, invited, energized by the experience itself to think freshly about the tradition. Such creativity demands that the teacher know the tradition deeply, widely, and lovingly.

A national initiative on anything is a daunting idea leading inevitably to a very large, nearly overwhelming, task. But this task—adolescent catechesis—is worthy of those who have the courage to stand on the edge of the stage, like poets, and speak a word that can rouse the hearts of the people. In service to that ministry, let us build a house for a new terrain, not resenting the factors that cause the need to conceive of a bold design for this time, this church, this pastoral reality in the United States. Let us build a house on rock.

Let us design boldly but with reference to our history, so that the next generation, and perhaps a few after them, can benefit from this design. In this way they might, through God's call, claim the ministry of catechesis as their own and proclaim to a church yet to be born: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

About the Author

Dr. Michael Horan is professor of religious education and pastoral theology at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. Dr. Horan, who holds a Ph.D. in religious education from The Catholic University of America, ministered to youth and young adults in high schools and college campuses in New York and Washington, D.C. He holds a special interest in the preparation of lay ministers for leadership in the Catholic Church.



For the past ten years Michael has taught Catholic lay ministers in graduate programs at LMU and in various universities throughout the nation each summer. Michael is an author of two works on the *General Directory for Catechesis* and is a contributing author of *Blest Are We*, the parish and school religious education series published by Silver Burdett Ginn. Dr. Horan chairs the Advisory Board for the Office of Pastoral Associates for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and he is a member of the Board of Directors of St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, California. Michael and his wife, Patricia Fiedler, live in Marina del Rey, California, and they are active parishioners at Saint Monica Church in Santa Monica.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Which sociological findings about religion in America in general, and Catholics in particular, surprised, troubled, or challenged you? What implications do you identify for people who minister to youth and/or the adults who love them?
- What would it take, in your view, to address some of the issues that you have identified as surprising, troubling, or challenging about adolescent catechesis?
- How does adult catechesis build on adults' life experience but also promote a theological understanding and a historically aware interpretation of Scripture?
- How might we do this more effectively in various settings (staff meetings, faculty gatherings, parent groups, with those in our homes)?
- What is your experience of adolescent faith sharing groups around the Scriptures?
- What would you take from these experiences to inject new life into adolescent catechesis?
- Can love for the gospels be deepened by further study and intellectual engagement to complement the spiritual interpretations often rendered in the first stages of faith in the prebaptismal catechumenate? How do adolescents respond to these interpretations?
- How do these questions apply to the lives of teenagers and the adults who love them, so that their engagement with the Scriptures offers them both a spiritual foundation and an intelligent understanding of the role of Scripture in the life of a disciple, and the communal life and tradition of the church?
- The challenge to achieve balance is also the inherent tension in catechesis: between faith as relationship and faith as the content/object of our trusting, between cognitive knowledge of the tradition and personal encounter with Christ.
- What practices in adolescent catechesis offer you hope that a balance can be achieved? In what contexts have you encountered this as a source of tension?

Sources for Further Reading and Consideration

As the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis develops plans and considers directions for effective service to youth, the following resources may be helpful.

Websites that describe the landscape and the response by various organizations that can inform the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis:

- AGPIM: Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry
www.msje.edu/agpim
- CARA: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University
www.cara.georgetown.edu
- NALM: National Association for Lay Ministry
www.nalm.org
- Pew Forum on Religion
www.religion.pewforum.org/reports
- NIAC: National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis
www.adolescentcatechesis.org
- United States Census Bureau
www.census.gov

Endnotes

Texts quoted in the body of this paper that will aid further reflection on the issues presented herein:

Introduction

¹United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), 100.

²The Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> (accessed May 11, 2009).

Surveying the Landscape

³Note that the CARA study was conducted in English and Spanish. The Pew study was in English or Spanish. Paul Perl, Jennifer Greely, and Mark Gray, "How Many Hispanics are Catholic? A Review of Survey Data and Methodology," (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2008) <http://cara.georgetown.edu/Hispanic%20Catholics.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2009) 3-6.

⁴William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge and Katherine Meyer, *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press, 2001) 69-101.

⁵Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 216-17; 67-71.

⁶Ibid, 116-117.

⁷Ibid, 261.

⁸Ken Johnson-Mondragón, ed., *Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens* (Stockton, California: Instituto Fe y Vida, 2007). 33-38.

Digging a Foundation

⁹Paul VI, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. 1965. Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 4.

¹⁰Smith with Denton, 68; 261.

¹¹*General Directory for Catechesis. Citta del Vaticano*, 1997. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 91.

¹²United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997) , 17.

¹³United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 16.

¹⁴United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing) 1997, 16.

Principles of Design

¹⁵*General Directory for Catechesis. Citta del Vaticano*, 1997. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 53.

¹⁶*Lumen Gentium*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed November 5, 2008), 11.

¹⁷United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 21.

¹⁸Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 260.

¹⁹United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 20.

Structural and Infrastructural Factors

²⁰Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51.

²¹See CARA, www.cara.georgetown.edu and AGPIM: Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry, www.msje.edu/agpim.

²²United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 22.

A Conclusion and a Metaphor

²³William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge, and Katherine Meyer. *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment*. (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press, 2001).

²⁴United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 19.

²⁵United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1997), 25

²⁶Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1985.) 1