The State of Adolescent Catechesis Today: A Review of the Literature

Jeffrey Kaster

The two-fold purpose of this article is to review current literature and develop implications and conclusions regarding the state of adolescent catechesis today. The scope of this review was limited because of time and space constraints and is heavily weighted toward sociological research.

Annotated Bibliography on Adolescent Catechesis

A. Sociological Research

1. East, T., Eckert, A. M., Kurtz, D., and Singer-Towns, B. (2004). *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press.

   The Center for Ministry Development and Saint Mary's Press sponsored a national symposium on effective youth ministry practices in Catholic parishes. More than 400 youth and adults engaged in youth ministry from 100 parishes were interviewed as part of this qualitative research. The symposium provided summaries of 36 key findings from youth, adult youth ministers and parish staff interviews. Five key areas of high impact were summarized, with the first described as "faith formation/adolescent catechesis that is engaging and connected to lives of youth" (p. 1).

2. Ebaugh, H. R. (2005). *Handbook of Religion and Social Institutions*. New York: Springer Science+Business Media, Inc.

   This handbook is written for sociologists interested in recent studies and theoretical approaches that relate religious variables to their particular areas of interest. Three chapters especially are important to note. David Sikkink and Jonathan Hill write an in-depth review of the history and politics of education related to religion, and review research on Catholic school effectiveness. W. Bradford Wilcox provides an overview of current research on the influence of the family on faith practice. Peter Benson and Pamela Ebstyne King provide one of the best summaries available of current research of youth and religion.

3. Francis, L. J., Robins, M. & Astley, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Religion, Education, and Adolescence: International Empirical Perspectives*. Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press.

   A collection of 12 presentations from the 2002 International Seminar on Religious Education and Values that provide securely grounded research into adolescents' views of religion in the United Kingdom, Europe and Israel. Of particular interest are the eight key conclusions the editors identify resulting from this focused collection on adolescence, religion and education. Four of these include: Europe and Israel are not heading toward rapid secularization; religion remains a significant factor in the lives of young Europeans; young people are redefining their religious traditions; and the task of the religious educator is enriched and enabled by the discipline of empirical enquiry that listens to young people themselves (p. 11).

4. Hudson, W. (2002). *Window on Mission: A CHS 2000 Report on Academic and Co-Curricular Programs and Services and Religious*

Education and Formation. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.

This report summarizes survey data from a sample of 300 Catholic high schools. It provides important benchmark data on instructional inputs for adolescent catechesis including staffing, curriculum, assessment and formation. It reports that 88 percent of Catholic high schools require students to take four credits or 480 hours of religious instruction and, on average, perform 51 hours of service.

5. Markuly, M. S. (2002). "Being Faithful—Pursuing Success: Tools for Assessment." *The Living Light*, 38 (3). 61-77.

This text raises two very important questions: How do we really know what religious education outcomes we accomplish, and, more importantly, what instructional practices most effectively help accomplish these outcomes? The author argues that pursuing empirical research and evaluation in adolescent catechesis will set religious education on the slow but steady path of making improvements.

6. McCorquodale, C., Shepp, V., and Sterten, L. (2004). *National Study of Youth and Religion: Analysis of the Population of Catholic Teenagers and Their Parents. A Research Report Produced for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.* Washington, DC: National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

This research report further analyzes the Catholic-related data from the National Study of Youth and Religion. The study found that many Catholic young people are not served or reached by the church. It also found that participation in parish programming, regular Mass attendance and Catholic school attendance reduces at-risk behaviors in youth and that youth need an evangelizing and a welcoming community.

7. Mitchell, J. and Marriage, S. (eds.). (2003). *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture.* New York: T & T Clark.

This text resulted from presentations and conversations at the Third International Conference on Media, Religion and Culture hosted by the University of Edinburgh in July 1999. It explores empirically how religious identity is formed in the current media culture. This text includes helpful annotated bibliographies on media ethics, new media and religion, film and religion and communication and theology. Of particular relevance is Mary E. Hess' chapter on media culture and how to engage media culture in religious education.

8. Roehlkepartain, E., Ebstyne King, P, Wagener, L., and Benson, P. (Eds.). (2006). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This reference handbook by leading scholars from multiple disciplines (psychology, sociology, medicine, anthropology and education) provides a comprehensive review of current scientific knowledge of adolescent spiritual development. Rev. Dean Borgman asks important questions: "Why aren't congregations having a more profound effect on their children and surrounding communities? How can we get our latest studies and findings into the trenches?" (p. 435). He argues for bringing youth workers and catechetical leaders into dialogue with current research on the spiritual development of adolescents. This text is an excellent resource around which academics, researchers and serious practitioners of adolescent catechesis might engage such a dialogue.

9. Search Institute. (1990, March). *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations. A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life.* Minneapolis, MN: Benson, P. L. & Eklin, C.H.

This 1990 report (available at www.search-institute.org/downloads) remains one of the few congregational studies on effective Christian education in the United States. In relation to faith growth and congregational loyalty for both youth and adults, the report concludes, "nothing matters more than effective Christian education" (p. 2).

10. Smith, C. and Lundquist Denton, M. (2005) *Soul Searching. The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teens.* New York: Oxford University Press.

This seminal text reports the comprehensive research findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (www.youthandreligion.

org/) conducted from July 2002 to March 2003. This study is unique because it utilized random telephone sampling procedures (sample size 3,290) that appear to accurately estimate the population of U.S. teens ages 13-17 and their parents.

The authors note that Catholic youth scored significantly lower than their conservative, mainline or black Protestant peers on many aspects of religiosity. The authors devote an entire chapter to analyzing Catholic data. They offer five explanations for Catholic teenage religious laxity: 1) demographic differences (Catholics congregate in regions of the country that are less religious); 2) low levels of Catholic parent religiosity; 3) lack of institutional commitment of resources; 4) changes in Catholic schools and CCD; and 5) upward mobility and acculturation (pp. 207-215).

The data on Catholic Hispanic teens suggest a wide disparity exists economically, socially and educationally between Hispanic and white Catholics. Hispanic teens reported a greater frequency of family religious practices, but were less likely than white teens to participate in parish and Catholic school-based religious programs and activities. Instituto Fe y Vida recently published a report analyzing this data, which is available online at www.feyvida.org.

B. Theological Foundations

1. Duggan, R. D. (2001). The New Constellation of Catechesis. *The Living Light*, 37(4).

Any serious discussion of adolescent catechesis would demand an overall understanding of the theology of catechesis. Mr. Duggan's article outlines five elements in the new paradigm of Catholic catechesis: 1) evangelization as the context in which catechesis is situated; 2) the catechumenate as model for all catechesis; 3) the role of Christian community; 4) the primacy of adult catechesis; and 5) inculturation.

2. Cook, T. J. (2001). *Architects of Catholic Culture: Designing & Building Catholic Culture in Catholic Schools*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.

Addressing the shift in Catholic schools to lay leadership, this NCEA monograph offers Catholic school principals practical ways to conceptualize

> **How might parishes and schools effectively engage and support parents in fostering Christian discipleship practices in their homes?**

their role in building Catholic school culture. It concludes with seven helpful norms for building Catholic culture in schools.

3. Hagarty, M T. & Hagarty, M. J. (2002). "Evangelizing Catechesis and Comprehensive Youth Ministry," *The Living Light*, 38 (3), 6-20.

The importance of this article rests in that it was the only source found that identifies definitional and conceptual differences in the "General Directory for Catechesis" and "Renewing the Vision."

4. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. (1997). *General Directory for Catechesis*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

The "General Directory for Catechesis" (GDC) is the official theological reference for catechesis in the Catholic Church. The use of the term "general" in the title is important because it functions as a general point of reference for catechetical content, pedagogy and methodology. It is to be used as a reference tool for creating national catechetical directories that adapt these principles to unique cultural situations. A main point of the document lies in its situating catechesis within the Catholic Church's mission of evangelization.

5. McCarty, R. (ed.) (2005). *The Vision of Catholic Youth Ministry. Fundamentals, Theory, and Practice*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press.

Utilizing "Renewing the Vision" as its theoretical base, this text compiles a review of current thinking on Catholic youth ministry. Sean Reynolds provides a clear link between leadership for Catholic youth ministry (chapter 17) and the national certification standards for lay ecclesial ministers.

6. National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1997). *Renewing the Vision. A Framework*

for Catholic Youth Ministry. Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"Renewing the Vision" (RTV), the first youth ministry document to be endorsed officially by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, provides the operational vision and goals for youth ministry in the Catholic Church in the United States. It provides a vision for Catholic youth ministry that includes three goals set in a framework called "comprehensive ministry with adolescents." This framework asserts that it takes a whole church community to accomplish these goals. RTV situates adolescent catechesis and evangelization as two of these eight components in its comprehensive framework.

7. Rolheiser, R. (2004). "Creating an Evangelizing Spirituality Beyond Ecclesial and Theological Maintenance: The Search for a New Missiology within a Secularized Culture." In *Ministry Through the Lens of Evangelization* (pp. 123-135). Washington DC: Secretariat for Evangelization, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

This talk was a major presentation at the North American Institute for Catholic Evangelization, July 9-12, 2003, in Portland, Oregon. Father Rolheiser suggests the problem is not with the programming we do with people who are coming through the church doors, but rather in getting people who have been away for a while to enter the doors. He suggests we need a new paradigm of mission in our parishes concerning evangelization to those not filling the pews currently.

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

The *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) applies universal church teaching on evangelization and catechesis as outlined in the *General Directory for Catechesis* to the contextual setting within the United States. Its three basic purposes are to: 1) provide fundamental theological and pastoral principles; 2) offer guidelines for application in this country; and 3) set forth the nature, purpose, object, tasks, content and methodology of catechesis (p. 17). Chapter 7 includes a section on catechesis of adolescents where it states "effective catechetical programs for adolescents are integrated into a comprehensive program of pastoral ministry for youth" (p. 201).

9. Warren, M. (2002). "*Youth Ministry in an Inconvenient Church" and "Cultural Resistance in Youth: Problems and Possibilities*." The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry. Found on the web at: http://www.ptsem.edu/iym/research/lectures/lectures02.htm.

Michael Warren gave two challenging lectures in 2002 at the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture. In "Youth Ministry in an Inconvenient Church" he challenges youth ministry to think seriously about the meaning of forming adolescent Christian disciples. In "Cultural Resistance in Youth: Problems and Possibilities" Warren addresses how the contexts of peer groups, family and church shape the hearts of young people and questions if youth can find adult faith filled communities to teach them.

C. Faith Practices

1. Bass, D. & Richter, D. (Eds.). (2002). *A Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books.

"A Way to Live" is a collaborative effort by 18 adult and 18 teen authors, written for teens using language and imagery they can understand easily. Each of the19 chapters portrays a particular practice in depth and complexity. A free leader's guide is available at http://www.waytolive.org/.

2. White, D. F. (2005). *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

David White draws from his research experience at the Youth Theological Initiative to explore a serious new approach to

youth ministry involving the faith practice of discernment. White argues that congregations should engage teens in practices that resemble the discernment practiced by Christian communities throughout history.

3. Van Engen, J. (2004). *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities.* Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans Publishing.

This significant text describes historically how Jews and Christians have been formed in their faith. The authors all use the notion of "practices" as they explore religious formation in catechesis, the study of scripture, rituals, preaching and the ordinary choices of daily life.

D. Family and Adult Catechesis

1. Regan, J. E. (2002). *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation*. Chicago: Loyola Press.

This text proposes to move beyond the present configuration of religious education with its focus on children and youth to "re-imagine the religious education endeavor from the perspective of the faith formation of the adult community and, in light of that, the formation of children and youth" (p. 12). Ms. Regan argues that to be church in the 21st century, dedication to fostering mature, committed adult communities of faith is essential.

2. Cook Everist, N. (2002) *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

The purpose of this text is 1) to put forth a vision of the entire parish as a learning community; 2) to help faith communities create and maintain learning environments that facilitate us being different together in a pluralistic world; and 3) to provide a comprehensive guide for religious educators leading a congregation toward fully becoming a learning community.

3. Strommen, M P. & Hardel, R. A. (2000). *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press.

This text, co-authored by one of the deans of youth ministry, Dr. Merton Strommen, proposes a partnership between parents and congregations for faith development in teens. It proposes a new model integrating youth and family ministry.

Implications and Conclusions

One definition of implication is the involvement or entanglement of somebody in something. This review of the literature of adolescent catechesis clearly suggests that the current state of adolescent catechesis is an entanglement in negative cultural trends not supporting family religious practices or parish or school catechesis. Adolescent catechesis is likewise knotted in competing visions and seriously entangled by a lack of research and assessment of effective practice.

It is important to acknowledge that the literature directly related to adolescent catechesis is sparse. This literature review has been weighted toward social science research into adolescent religious development because much of the outstanding insight is coming from this field of study. Much work and research will be required in the future if adolescent catechesis is to move forward in a serious fashion.

From this literature review, four conclusions can be drawn.

> **Adolescent catechesis is likewise knotted in competing visions and seriously entangled by a lack of research and assessment of effective practice.**

Conclusion #1: Adolescent catechetical leaders should engage social science data and theory to inform their practice and, specifically, gain competence in effective evaluation of student and parent learning.

Social science traditionally has paid limited attention to adolescent religious and spiritual development. However, in the last few years there has been a significant increase in social science scholarship related to adolescent religious and spiritual development. A number

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of new literature reviews in child and adolescent religious and spiritual development provide access to knowledge across disciplines (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p. 3). The recent publications of the two major handbooks, "Religion and Social Institutions" (2005) and "Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence" (2006) help move the study of religion and adolescence into the mainstream of social science research. A common concern expressed in this literature is the general lack of knowledge and involvement in social science research and program assessment by practitioners of adolescent catechesis.

Catholic schools have done a much better job of research and program assessment than parishes (Hudson, 2002), but even Catholic school research has focused primarily on academic achievement or benchmarking catechetical inputs. It's important to highlight the significant lack of published research evaluating the effectiveness of adolescent catechetical programming or processes in forming Christian disciples. This literature review leaves unanswered the essential question facing adolescent catechesis: "What is working?"

Conclusion #2: Adolescent catechesis should more effectively communicate to parents and teens the empirical data demonstrating positive outcomes associated with adolescent engagement in religious practices.

There is a growing body of sociological literature that establishes positive outcomes of religious practice for youth. Religious involvement is associated positively with overall well-being; positive life attitudes and hope for the future, altruism and service, resources that assist risk reduction, well-being, thriving, resiliency and coping, school success (particularly in Catholic schools), physical health and positive identity formation.

Religious practice is negatively associated with alcohol and drug use, crime, violence and delinquency, depression, danger seeking and risk-taking, and early sexual activity ("Handbook of Religion and Social Institutions," p. 134).

The good news is that much social science research has established empirically great benefits associated with adolescent participation in faith practices in their families, schools and parishes.

Conclusion #3: Adolescent catechetical efforts should have a primary focus on engaging parents in faith practices.

The catechetical alarm bell started ringing when the data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (Smith, 2005) indicated Catholic teens "stand out among the U.S. Christian teenagers as consistently scoring lower on most measures of religiosity" and that Catholic youths scored "5 to 25 percentage points lower than their conservative, mainline, and black Protestant peers on many of a variety of religious beliefs, practices, experiences, commitments, and evaluations" (p. 194). Mr. Smith concludes that Catholic teens are faring rather badly when compared to other Christian teens. He argues that the majority of U.S. teenagers "tend to be quite like their parents when it comes to religion" (p 68).

Chris Boyatzis, David Dollahite and Loren Marks review family research in the "Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence" (2006). They conclude, with numerous other researchers, that: "The family is probably the most potent influence—for better or worse—on children's spiritual and religious development" (p. 305). They identified 10 central processes families use to facilitate religious and spiritual development among family members:

> Relying on God for support and guidance; living religion at home; resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness; loving and serving others in the family, faith community and larger community; overcoming challenges through shared faith; abstaining from proscribed activities and substances; sacrificing time, money, comfort and convenience for religious/spiritual reasons; nurturing spiritual observance and

growth in family members through teaching, example and discussion; obeying God; and putting faith or family ahead of personal interests. (p. 299)

The social science research indicates that the most significant factor in the religious development of adolescents is the religiosity of their parents. The need to actively engage parents in adolescent catechesis is one of the most significant conclusions of this literature review.

Conclusion #4: Catholic youth ministry should revise its vision to align it with the vision of evangelization and catechesis outlined in the GDC and NDC.

Church documents agree that adolescent catechesis seeks to form adolescent Christian disciples. But nowhere in these documents is a clear profile of adolescent Christian discipleship defined. Perhaps this lack of definitional clarity fuels confusion about the distinctive roles religious education, youth ministry and Catholic schools play in adolescent catechesis. Confusion also exists in the definitions of the terms catechesis and evangelization.

The "General Directory for Catechesis" (GDC) designates evangelization as the church's essential mission in the world and situates catechesis as one function within it. "Renewing the Vision" (RTV), which was published prior to the GDC, does not define evangelization and catechesis this way. It locates evangelization and catechesis as two of eight components within the framework of comprehensive youth ministry. The theoretical problem is that RTV does not define comprehensive Catholic youth ministry within the context of the church's mission of evangelization and catechesis. The "National Directory for Catechesis" (NDC), published after both RTV and the GDC, acknowledges the role of comprehensive youth ministry in adolescent catechesis, but it does not resolve the confusion highlighted above. With such a clear emphasis on catechesis situated within the context of evangelization in both the GDC and NDC, it may well be time for an alignment of vision for youth ministry.

Remaining Questions

Challenging questions remain. What is an adolescent Christian disciple? What adolescent

catechetical efforts actually form Christian disciples? How might parishes and schools effectively engage and support parents in fostering Christian discipleship practices in their homes? What impact does the instruction provided by Catholic schools or parish programs have on forming adolescent Christian disciples? Is Catholic youth ministry by definition adolescent evangelization and catechesis?

This literature review of adolescent catechesis did not untangle adequate responses to these questions, but it may provide an agenda for the future. Perhaps a fitting conclusion concerning the state of adolescent catechesis in the United States comes from the European research of Rev. Leslie Francis, Dr. Mandy Robins, and Jeff Astley (2005). They conclude that religion remains a significant factor in the lives of European teens. They further suggest that adolescent catechesis will be enriched by the discipline of empirical study that listens to young people themselves.

Jeffrey Kaster, director of the youth in theology and ministry program at Saint John's School of Theology Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota, teaches courses in pastoral ministry and catechesis at Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict. He completed a MA in theology (scripture) from Saint John's School of Theology in 1985 and is completing his doctoral degree from the University of Minnesota in Education, Policy, and Administration. His dissertation research focuses on assessing intermediate outcomes associated with intensive youth ministry.

www. adolescentcatechesis.org

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