

Vision of a Well-Formed Adolescent: Young Disciples on the Way

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Among the most cherished blessings of my ministry are the many graced opportunities I have had to come to know and minister with teens and young adults, and with those responsible for their formation as disciples of Jesus Christ. As a young priest teaching in Catholic high schools in Massachusetts and working on a Th.D. in religious education, my choice of research topic for my dissertation came easily: “The Roman Catholic Secondary School As Faith Community: Educational, Developmental and Theological Considerations”¹. Adolescent catechesis has long been a passion for me. It continues to be today. When the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis (PAC) invited me to prepare this presentation for our symposium and gave me as a theme the “vision of a well-formed adolescent,” I readily and enthusiastically agreed, and for several reasons.

First, I believe that the work that the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis is engaging in is one of the most significant and potentially far reaching developments currently underway in the field of catechetical ministry in the United States. It is a privilege to participate in it, and to be in creative solidarity with all of you.

Second, like you, I have personally known so many wonderful teens who have been, and are indeed being, well formed. They love the Lord, are active in the life of their faith communities, and are moving ahead on their journey of apprenticeship as young Catholics. I think of a high school sophomore at World Youth Day a few years ago in Cologne, and remember how moved I was during a Mass with our pilgrims from Maine when this young woman prayed so sincerely during the prayers of the faithful, “Change my heart, Lord. Just change my heart.” She had heard the call to conversion, she knew that grace came from Christ, and she prayed to have it.

I think of the teens from so many of our dioceses

who use their spring vacation to do service work in Appalachia, and of the thousands from around the nation who make the trip to Washington, D.C., every January to take part in the March for Life. I think of the kids in Portland, Maine, who descend every Thursday evening into our cathedral crypt for Theology Underground, their variation on the Dead Theologians Society. They pray together, and they study and discuss topics ranging from the lives and sayings of the great saints to the church’s teaching in opposition to physician-assisted suicide, capital punishment, and embryonic stem cell research. Each of you can name other examples of strong, promising adolescent formation that builds upon components of comprehensive youth ministry.

A third reason occurred to me as I was thinking about the teens I have known whom I would call well-formed. At the risk of sounding self-satisfied or smug, looking back at my own experience as a teen, I will take the risk of saying that my own formation in the faith was a good one. The important hermeneutical key that it was another era notwithstanding (I graduated from high school in 1964), I am grateful for the ways God’s grace was at work through my family, my parish, my friends, and my elementary and secondary school experience. Thanks to the graced dynamics, the sacred synergies that ran through those major formative relationships and environments, I think I was pretty well formed (if in no way perfectly!) as a young disciple, within, of course, the context, understandings, expectations, possibilities and limitations (e.g., there was not too much on Scripture) of those days. My family was a little domestic church, long before Vatican II introduced that ecclesiological nuance and Pope John Paul II elevated it. I was marinated—not just instructed in a schooling sense (that, too)—but marinated (translate “socialized”) in the basic flavors of Catholic life from my earliest years,

formed gradually in the creed, code and cult, and the symbolic world of Catholic tradition. Fr. Robert Barron, in his *Beyond Beige Churches*, aptly describes this marinade in which many of us were flavored and formed:

Like baseball or being American, Christianity is a complex set of practices, beliefs, convictions and behaviors, learned through an elaborate and lived process under the tutelage of a series of masters. . . The way of Jesus is not something that comes welling up spontaneously from the depths of one's consciousness or from one's experiences. Rather it is placed in us through symbol, ritual, ethical behavior, saints, art, architecture, poetry, theology, etc."²

Example: I remember when I was five or six years old the moment when my Aunt Gertrude slid the corpus off of a fat crucifix in her home, and showed me the tiny "sacristy" within: small candles, a bottle of holy water, little linens. So it was that I came to know at that young age that my church has a ministry to sick and homebound people. Later in school, a Sister of Notre Dame, with her Baltimore Catechism in hand, would introduce us to the sacrament that we now call anointing of the sick: then, extreme unction (the latter term something the entire church had to unlearn after Vatican II). Socialization and intentional catechesis were happening. And it worked.

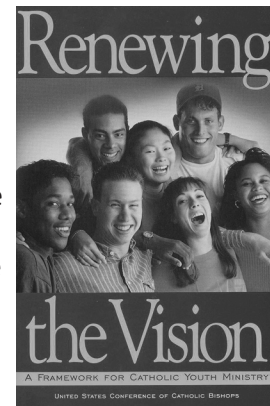
My family was deeply involved in the life of our parish. I cannot recall a single Sunday or holy day when we did not go to Mass, unless someone was down with the flu. Confession was a regular feature of the rhythm of family life, mom and dad leading the way by example. And I learned about generous, compassionate service to others as I watched my parents sacrifice for me and my sister, and inconvenience themselves to help others out. I even had early ecumenical formation. My mom's father, a lifelong Swedish Lutheran, back in the 1950s would invite the rather formal, even formidable Monsignor Degan, our pastor, to join him on the porch for conversation. Of course, that bit of ecumenical witness did not stop me from running home like a jackrabbit when a nice lady

from the Christian Science Church on our street invited me in one day to see their sanctuary! Not all ingredients in the marinade were healthy ones. I learned that later. Formation is lifelong, thank God, and involves unlearning as well as learning. Now we call it critical reflection.

Domestic church, parish involvement, regular sacramental life, socialization and intentional catechesis, adult models and mentors, schools with a robust Catholic culture: All of these elements were in place, and they had their effect. Most importantly, I know that God's grace was at work through it all. And it could work so well because of the rich and pervasive Catholic culture that permeated the entire experience at that time in our history.

A fourth reason, and certainly not the least, is that the church's recent documents, *Renewing the Vision* and the *National Directory for Catechesis (NDC)* in particular, provide a compelling and comprehensive vision and sound principles for adolescent faith formation set within the context of lifelong catechesis and inspired by the baptismal catechumenate. Who could argue, for example, with the *NDC's* insistence that a well formed adolescent will have a growing understanding and appreciation of sacred Scripture, the church and the sacraments, the principles of Christian morality, and prayer. He or she will also be coming to realize and accept the baptismal commitment to mission, especially evangelization; will be participating in the liturgy, developing ecumenical understanding, and learning about the important commitment to discern Christ's call to marriage, chaste single life, ordained ministry, consecrated life, or lay ecclesial ministry. There are no surprises here.

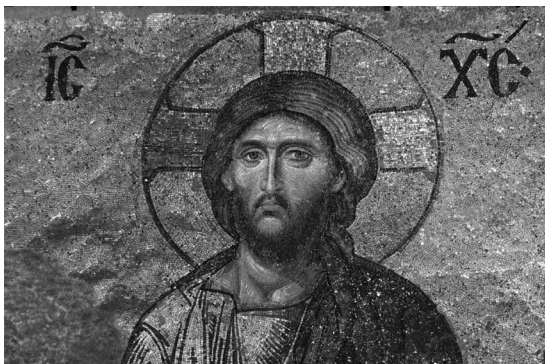
The leading indicator of effective formation of an adolescent disciple, of course, is the quality of a teen's developing relationship with Christ and so with his church. "Catechesis aims to bring about in the believer an ever more mature faith in Jesus Christ, a deeper knowledge and love of



his person and message, and a firm commitment to follow him”.³ Because of this aim of catechesis, all of our efforts to form adolescents must have an intentional evangelizing dynamic. It was with that objective in mind that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis took on the project of preparing our resource *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age*.”

While a curriculum framework may appear at first glance to be exclusively about the content of faith, the *fides quae creditur*, it is important to note that the document’s introduction casts its motivation and fundamental purpose in the mode of evangelizing catechesis. Citing the now standard definition of the aim of catechesis as “to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ”,⁴ *Doctrinal Elements* goes on to say that

The Christological centrality of this framework is designed to form the content of instruction as well as to be a vehicle for growth in one’s relationship with the Lord so that each may come to know him and live according to the truth he has given to us. In this way, disciples not only participate deeper in the life of the church but are also better able to reach eternal life with God in Heaven.⁵



The Christological thrust of the document is apparent in the titles of the six elements of the core curriculum: The Revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture; Who Is Jesus Christ?; The Mission of Jesus Christ (The Paschal Mystery); Jesus Christ’s Mission Continues in the Church; Sacraments as

Privileged Encounters with Jesus Christ; and Life in Jesus Christ. The recommended electives also keep Christ as their organizational principle: Sacred Scripture; History of the Catholic Church; Living as a Disciple of Jesus Christ in Society; Responding to the Call of Jesus Christ; and Ecumenical and Interreligious Issues.

The framework is intended first to guide catechetical publishers in the production of instructional materials for Catholic high schools, as well as for parish catechetical and youth ministry programs, and for home schooled teens. It is also intended to be a guide for diocesan catechetical leaders, teachers, and catechists who are responsible for adolescent faith formation in whatever setting it is offered. Obviously, the formats in which the doctrinal elements are presented will vary significantly depending on whether the catechesis is offered in a Catholic secondary school curriculum or in a parish comprehensive youth ministry or confirmation preparation program. We will need to rely on the competence and creativity of PAC, the publishers, and others committed to adolescent catechesis to bring this work to effective implementation.

The bishops do not suggest that the promulgation of the curriculum framework is by itself the “magic bullet” for the strengthening of adolescent catechesis. We do argue, though, that any efforts to improve adolescent catechesis that would exclude those doctrinal elements will fall far short of the goal of well-formed teen disciples of Jesus Christ.

The heart of the matter is offering catechesis that, with God’s grace, can arouse faith in Christ as well as form, inform, and transform that faith. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, Preacher to the Papal Household, argues that our work of evangelization and catechesis must be informed by what the apostles did in evangelizing the world of the first century. He asks

“. . . what is the content of the preaching of the apostles? The work of God in Jesus of Nazareth! That is true, but there is something even more specific that is the vital nucleus of everything and that, with respect to all else, is like the blade that goes before the plow to

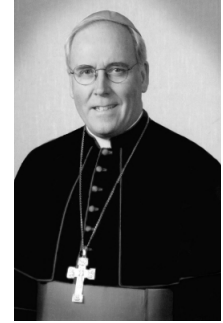
break up the soil so that it can turn over the ground and make a furrow in it. That more specific nucleus is the exclamation “Jesus is Lord!” proclaimed and received in the wonder of a faith *statu nascenti*, that is, in the act of being birthed.”⁶

I will conclude by recommending a book that you may well have already discovered. If you have not, go get it. It is *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children*.⁷ Rolheiser calls us to become missionaries within our own highly secularized culture, missionaries among our own children. I leave you with these realistic and yet encouraging words:

Risking the next steps into a committed direction could be a leap of faith toward new missionary effectiveness. It could also be a dive off the edge of a cliff into an abyss of confusion and self-doubt. The dangers, challenges, and opportunities of this situation are great. Therefore, they require an equal measure of careful and considered pastoral missionary reflection. Success may require an equal measure of careful and considered pastoral missionary reflection. Success may be measured in the short term and on the moderate scale, but ultimate success must be left in God’s hands. Thus, while we struggle and thrash about, it is important to remember that there are strong arms and a steady grip to bear us up should we falter in our efforts. God never fails!

About the Author

Bishop Richard Joseph Malone is the 11th Bishop of Portland. He was installed as Bishop of Portland on March 31, 2004 after serving as auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Boston, South Region. He graduated from St. John Seminary, Boston with a B.A. in philosophy, a bachelor’s degree in divinity and a master’s degree in theology. In 1981, Bishop Malone earned a Doctorate in theology (Th.D.) at Boston University and a Licentiate in Sacred Theology (S.T.L.) at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge in 1990. He is the chair-elect of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis for the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops.



Endnotes

¹Boston University School of Theology, 1981

²Reverend Robert Barron, “Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-Liberal, Post-Conservative Evangelical Catholic,” Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004

³*NDC*, 54

⁴*Catechesi Tradendae*, 5

⁵*Doctrinal Elements*, 4.

⁶Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap, *Remember Jesus Christ: Responding to the Challenges of Faith in Our Time*, Jamesville, Md.: The Word Among Us Press, (2007), 18.

⁷Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I., *The Crossroad* Publishing Company, New York, 2006.