

Adolescent Catechesis Today: On the Road to Transformation

Michael Theisen

"And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him." (Lk 24:15-16)

That road to Emmaus must be a popular one. It seems that many of our young would-be disciples are still walking it, their backs to Jerusalem, seemingly clueless to the Jesus in their midst and wondering what the meaning and direction of life holds from this moment forward.

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) certainly supports this idea of a generation of potential disciples lost along the roadway. This extensive research study conducted through the University of North Carolina between 2001 and 2005 by Dr. Christian Smith and colleagues set out to study the spiritual and religious lives of American teens and "found the vast majority of [teenagers] to be *incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives" (*Soul Searching*, p. 131).

In summarizing the results of this contemporary study, Dr. Smith laments, "for very many U.S. teens, religion is important but not a priority, valued but not much invested in, praised but

not very describable." Dr. Smith then challenges those of us who take this work seriously with the conclusion "that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth" (*Soul Searching*, p. 262).

Like the hopeless disciples on the road, those involved in the faith formation of adolescents may want to turn around and walk in the other direction, pointing fingers and assigning blame for this contemporary tragedy, lamenting "What do we do now?" We mustn't let this remain simply a rhetorical question.

Answering the Critical Questions

The data from the NSYR is not surprising for anyone who has been engaged actively in adolescent catechesis for any length of time, but it now provides the evidence we need to address better the issues that have been festering below the surface of adolescent catechetical programming for some time. In her documents, the church consistently has raised these issues and offered guidance with which to transform adolescent catechesis. The church's vision combined with the passion, commitment and creativity of all involved in faith formation can help in redefining the reality of forming the faith of young people. But where do we start? What are the next steps we should be taking to change course? Specifically, there are five areas that parish and school leaders should be focusing on at the local level.

If the faith formation of adolescents is going to change, then parish and school leaders must begin working together across ministerial boundaries to keep their collective eye on the end result. Often the first stumbling block to effective adolescent catechesis is our own grip on 'territory'.

Begin and End with the Vision

If the faith formation of adolescents is going to change, then parish and school leaders must begin working together across ministerial boundaries to keep their collective eye on the end result. Often the first stumbling block to effective adolescent catechesis is our own grip on “territory.” More time is spent guarding turf and time-honored structures than tending the garden of faith that is our collective charge. Moving present paradigms from “mine” to “ours” must start with finding common ground, a vision that we can all embrace and work toward.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) says that “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch with, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (#71) and reminds us that “the totality of the church’s efforts is to make disciples...” (#73). This primary task of catechesis in forming disciples is echoed in both the *National Directory for Catechesis* (#20) [NDC] as well as the USCCB youth ministry document, *Renewing the Vision* (p. 9).

Five Focus Areas

1. Begin and end with the vision
2. Create empowering and engaging catechetical models
3. Employ intentional and systematic methodologies
4. Form catechists to reach outside the box
5. Partner with parents

If these guiding documents agree that formation of disciples is our ever-present goal, our all-encompassing task with teenagers, then together, we must question how well our present methods and models give birth to this reality. This self-examination of our overall structure and programming for young people is a crucial and often overlooked step, in acquiring a new paradigm for adolescent catechesis.

In assessing parish or school adolescent catechetical programming, faith formation leaders must ask (and answer) five key questions

that will keep efforts focused on the primary goal of disciple making:

1. How is God made more visible through this (activity/program/model)?
2. How will this (activity/program/model) bring young people into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ?
3. How can I more fully involve young people in this (activity/program/model)?
4. How can I more fully partner with parents in this (activity/program/model)?
5. How can I model and share my own faith journey through this (activity/program/model)?

These questions should be imprinted into the beginning, middle and end of all that we do with adolescent ministry, whether it be through school, religious education or youth ministry programming.

Create Empowering and Engaging Models

He asked them, “What are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped, looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” And he replied to them, “What sort of things?” (Lk 24:17-19a)

In the Emmaus journey Jesus illustrates what is required to lead young disciples to the threshold of transformation today: a methodology of empowerment. Jesus’ empowering approach begins where the struggling disciples are, not where he is. He listens to their questions, to their concerns and struggles. Not until their present reality has been laid out before him does he begin to fan the dying embers of faith still alive in their hearts with the story of salvation history, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (Lk 24:27).

This walking with Jesus approach is relational at heart. It respects the individual’s unique journey by starting where the person is and rightfully assumes that leader and learner share a relationship of faith. Unfortunately, too many models and methods in adolescent catechesis

lean toward an overpowering approach.

The GDC reminds leaders that “young people cannot be considered only objects of catechesis...” (for example, where the leader distributes knowledge as a commodity), they need also to be “active subjects and protagonists of evangelization and artisans of social renewal” (183). In examining current methods and models of faith formation, how often are we, like Jesus, empowering those with whom we share the road? Do we use techniques and strategies that respect the ability of the young people to take ownership of the learning process by involving them actively in their faith formation? Do we engage them fully in the teaching and learning process or have they become passive pupils whose minds are objects to be filled with as much information as allotted time allows?

A national research project conducted on effective youth ministry practices in Catholic parishes (*Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, Saint Mary's Press, 2004) revealed that “effective faith formation with adolescents has to be engaging and connect faith to youth's life experience” (p. 44-45). It goes on to highlight three vital ingredients for effective adolescent catechesis:

1. It has to be integrated into all the activities and components of youth ministry, not just weekly classes.
2. It has to connect the content and doctrine of faith to the life experiences of young people.
3. It has to be innovative.

A few years ago in the Diocese of Rochester, parishes and schools were sent a survey on adolescent catechesis that contained a list of 25 models that could be used to help form the faith of adolescents (see sidebar.) They were asked to rate the effectiveness of the strategies they were using currently. When the results were compiled, there was some surprise at what emerged as the top five most effective delivery systems.

They were:

1. Summer intensive programs such as vacation Bible school

25 Models for Adolescent Catechesis

- Traditional youth night gathering
- Weekly or daily “classroom” model
- Summer intensive—Vacation Bible School/Camps
- Drama/acting groups/events
- Super Saturdays—large monthly/quarterly events
- Youth as teachers/aides—youth catechists/peer leaders who learn by teaching.
- Retreat programs—day, overnight, weekend
- Service learning—work camps, urban/rural plunges
- Diocesan/National/Regional Gatherings, Rally's, and Conventions
- Family-centered meetings or activities
- Intergenerational—meet in age groups with mixed interaction
- Pilgrimages—journeys to national and international events/places.
- Lectionary-based focusing on Sunday readings
- Mentoring/spiritual direction model—one on one
- Mini-courses (e.g. topical themes covering 4-6 wks.)
- Small faith communities or groups (bible study, faith-sharing)
- Catechumenal model
- Menu Model—select from a variety of options
- Multi-parish programming
- Gender-based groups
- Technology-based (e.g. online, CD ROM)
- Home Study
- Rites of passage—preparation and celebration of cultural markers.
- Religious Recognitions—GSA/BSA/Camp Fire medal and award programs.
- Liturgical ministries—preparing and serving as Eucharistic ministers, lectors, altar servers.

The Diocese of Rochester survey results can be viewed at <http://www.dor.org/ec/youthministry/inforsleaders/catechesis.htm>

2. Drama and acting programs including those for liturgy, Stations of the Cross and classroom skits
3. Retreat programs including day, overnight or weekend events
4. Youth as teacher/learner where young people learn by serving as catechists and aides
5. Service learning programs such as work camps and service activities that include process reflections

At the top of the list was a program designed for young children in elementary school. So why was it rated most effective for adolescent catechesis? Vacation Bible school leaders explained that it fully engaged teens as teachers, aides and activity leaders while involving many parents in the process. In reviewing the top strategies, several telling similarities can be found:

- They creatively and fully engage young people in the learning process, often as teachers or peer leaders.
- They are intense and necessitate relationship building among the participants.
- They often offer something back to the community.
- They utilize the gifts of young people and actively involve the whole person (head, heart and hands).

Certainly the more often we engage and involve young people in their own learning, the more fully formed these young disciples will become and this includes preparing youth to teach and share their faith with others. But how do we move from the vision to new models that engage and empower?

Intentional and Systematic Methodologies

The *General Directory for Catechesis* reminds us that lifelong faith formation “is accomplished through a great variety of forms: ‘systematic and occasional, individual and community, organized and spontaneous.’” (GDC #51, cf DCG (1971) 19d). This should not be interpreted to mean that adolescent catechesis is

Five key questions to keep focused on disciple making

1. How is God made more visible through this (activity/program/model)?
2. How will this (activity/program/model) bring young people into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ?
3. How can I more fully involve young people in this (activity/program/model)?
4. How can I more fully partner with parents in this (activity/program/model)?
5. How can I model and share my own faith journey through this (activity/program/model)?

equivalent to a recipe for stone soup. Rather than tossing together whatever comes along or appears to be the “program of the moment,” we must return to our task of disciple making and stay focused on the specific themes and content that comprise the core of our Catholic faith and identity.

Our role as faith formation leaders is to oversee the healthy marriage of content and creative methodology so that it can give birth to an owned and lived faith. If we are unfaithful to either the core content or creative methods we end up in an unhealthy marriage.

Being systematic in our presentation of the faith does not preclude being creative in our methodology. A systematic strategy of faith formation is like a series of extension ladders that rely upon the section beneath it in order for the climber to reach her or his goal. In the process of adolescent faith formation, each extension covers a specific faith theme; each rung offers another possible method of delivering the content of that section.

The faith formation leaders' role is to make sure those extensions and each individual rung are strong and solid and fit together in such a way that the end result—a well-formed disciple of Jesus Christ—can be reached. The *Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis* summarizes this end result well when it defines adolescent catechesis as a “systematic, planned and intentional pastoral activity directed towards the kind of teaching and learning which emphasizes growth in Christian faith through understanding,

reflection and transformation.”(p.5).

The documents that guide catechetical and youth ministry leaders to embrace the fullness of adolescent catechesis are clear that “the most effective catechetical programs for adolescents are integrated into a comprehensive program of pastoral ministry for you that includes catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care and prayer and worship” (NDC, p.201 CF: RTV, p. 26). This comprehensive approach also is reflected in the six tasks of catechesis outlined in the NDC (pp. 60-62). No matter how it is said, the reality is that catechesis and comprehensive ministry are inseparable partners and must co-exist in all that we do with our young people. Surely we can find a way to assist catechists at all levels to combine creativity with intentionality, engagement with systematic planning so that every ministry effort with young people contains a catechetical dimension that leads them closer to the God who calls them by name.

Transforming a lesson, a retreat or lock-in, a youth night or outreach effort into an engaging and meaningful catechetical experience is not done simply because we hope it turns out that way. We need to be proactive in our planning and development by having a firm grasp of the specific faith theme and learning objectives we want to accomplish through the activity and then finding ways to involve young people in the process.

Consider the often-used strategy of the lock-in. Instead of spending countless hours planning an all-night social event to build community among the youth, what might happen if an adventuresome leader gathered a small group of adults and youth to help transform it into an intentional and creative experience of faith formation? By spending a few moments at the beginning of the planning process reflecting on the five key questions outlined earlier, the leader intentionally can direct the planning toward one of the themes that make up the content of our faith, for example justice and service.

The leader facilitates a dialogue that focuses on serving those in need, scripture is brought into the discussion and the reading of the sheep and goats from Matthew 25 is highlighted. The group begins framing the lock-in around that reading, developing hourly segments involving skits,

The more often we engage and involve young people in their own learning, the more fully formed these young disciples will become, and this includes preparing youth to teach and share their faith with others.

games, videos and activities that highlight each of the corporal works of mercy.

When the planning takes a detour over a new game someone wants to try out, the leader re-focuses the group by asking how the game can be adapted to help them achieve their goal of learning about justice and service and forming disciples. The last three key questions concerning the involvement of youth and parents and modeling faith are used to design how the lock-in event will be implemented. Through this process, what started out as simply a “community-building” event has been transformed into an intentional, creative and engaging approach to catechesis with adolescents.

Most catechetical leaders and youth ministers would agree that there is no shortage of creative and engaging activities and approaches with young people. The shortage often exists with our ability to connect these approaches to a systematic catechesis. Trying approaches and strategies that are new to us or to our preferred teaching style can be an occasion of conversion for the leader.

Form Catechists to Reach Outside the Box

Most faith formation leaders reading this may be nodding to the general truths implied through the five key concepts and questions, but feeling overwhelmed by the time required to adopt new strategies. The truth is that disciple making is time consuming and demands commitment and reorganization of how we do things in our ministry to and with young people, including who we hire as teachers and who we recruit as catechists and program volunteers as well as how we form them.

Show me a successful catechist and I'll show

you an adventurer, someone who is not afraid to reach beyond the boundaries of traditional methods, who is eager to go to great lengths to echo the unfolding story of faith. If we are to change directions in adolescent catechesis today, we need to foster an attitude of healthy and holy risk-taking among our catechists and volunteers. This is not the same type of adolescent risk-taking in which an attitude of reckless abandon permeates decision making. Rather, the church must develop adventurous adults who can transform a lesson or activity from a task to be completed into a moment of grace, where God is made more visible and present by the way in which the lesson is taught.

These creative approaches lead to the engagement of the whole person (head, heart and hands) as well as a relational sharing of faith among those present. To be successful in forming disciples, we must empower the formers of those disciples to teach as Jesus did with Scripture, simple stories, objects and, most importantly, through their relationships. The more

Show me a successful catechist and I'll show you an adventurer, someone who is not afraid to reach beyond the boundaries of traditional methods, who is eager to go to great lengths to echo the unfolding story of faith.

time leaders put into forming and fashioning teachers, catechists and youth ministry volunteers with this mindset, the greater the yield of young faithful disciples who model that same vibrancy of faith.

Partner with Parents

The fifth key area for reinventing adolescent catechesis today comprises the role and faith journey of the parents of teenagers. One of the strongest conclusions the *National Study of Youth and Religion* found was that "the best



social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents *do* look like.” (p. 261) For good or bad, youth will mirror the faith their parents have, even though it may not show itself until later down the road. A 1992 Search Institute study (“What Teens Need from Adults,” March 1992) found that the three most important factors that empower the faith maturity among young people are family-based:

1. Family faith conversations
2. Family rituals and devotions
3. Family outreach and service

Youth ministers, catechetical leaders, teachers and catechists all know that faith is a lifelong process, but we have stumbled in our collective attempts to incarnate that with families. Current movements into whole community and multi-generational catechesis have begun to pick up steam across the country. No matter the method or model used, we must continue to ask how can we engage and involve parents (and grandparents) more actively in this lifelong process of faith formation. We need to equip parents with the tools to continue on their own journey of faith while modeling and sharing that journey with their growing children. At a time when some parents and teens distance themselves from one another, this will not be the easiest of tasks. Support and patience are required as we assist parents in taking their rightful role as primary educators of their children.

The Answer Is in Our Midst

And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem...” (Luke 24:30-33a)

If our young people are going to make the long journey toward discipleship, the paths each ministerial area and institution chooses to take have to connect, eventually merging the young

people onto a road that leads each of them toward the realization that *Jesus is in our midst*. This is the road that leads young people back to Jerusalem, the same one the transformed disciples ran along to share the Good News that could not be contained within their burning hearts.

When change was needed in biblical times, God raised up a prophet (or two) whose job it was to call the faithful to accountability by asking the hard questions, questions that

We need to equip parents with the tools to continue on their own journey of faith while modeling and sharing that journey with their growing children.

were designed to cajole and sting the public consciousness. Their collective cry was: change your ways and return to the Lord with your whole self (head, heart and hands). Might the cry of our “catechetical prophets” today be similar, redirecting us towards the formation of whole and holy disciples in heart, mind and body?

In the end, asking the five questions of vision and attending to the five action steps of adolescent catechesis leads to an examination of conscience, challenging the church to make the faith formation of teens a high priority in parishes and schools throughout our country. As the NSYR concludes:

...to achieve the huge religious potential that appears to exist for Catholic teens would seem to require that the church invest a great deal more attention, creativity, and institutional resources into its young members—therefore into its own life. Undeniably the future shape of the U.S. Catholic Church vitally depends on it (p. 194).

The hearts of the young are ready and receptive to hear the good news of faith that we are privileged to echo on God's behalf. Let us not be afraid to be prophetic risk-takers in doing so.



Michael Theisen is director for membership services for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry in Washington, D.C. and serves as the convener for the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis. In the past 25 years he has worked with adolescent catechesis at the parish, diocesan and national levels, publishing over twenty books and articles and speaking frequently on the topic throughout the U.S.

www.adolescentcatechesis.org

