

The State of Adolescent Catechesis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

Introduction - The Appropriateness of the Time

The publication of the National Directory for Catechesis is a moment for the church to celebrate and assess its diverse catechetical efforts in adolescent catechesis. Three national organizations—the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), the organizations that represent diocesan and parish religious educators, Catholic school teachers/campus ministers, and youth ministers—are taking this opportunity to cultivate national, diocesan, and local conversations about the principles, methods and strategies currently being used for adolescent catechesis as well as how we can organize and allocate resources for this ministry. Through these conversations the organizations hope to identify the essentials of catechesis for a catechetical plan directed towards the future of our church's mission with adolescents in Catholic schools, religious education, and youth ministry.

This article developed out of those conversations. Each organization invited a few of its members who are engaged in adolescent catechesis to participate in a SWOT analysis of the field of adolescent catechesis. (A SWOT analysis looks at the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of a particular issue.) Their comments have been combined into this article. Although approved for publication by the representatives from the organizations, the views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the organizations themselves. This article attempts to provide *grist for the mill* in order to facilitate a broader conversation.

The article briefly examines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to adolescent catechesis through a reflection on:

- Young people themselves
- The content and context of adolescent catechesis
- Those who minister to and catechize adolescents

Strengths to Build Upon

When we examine catechesis with adolescents today we note significant strengths.

Young People Themselves

According to the 2005 *National Study of Youth and Religion*, 76% of Catholic youth report that they plan to attend and to remain Catholic in their adulthood. 83% say they will or may attend Church when they are 25 years old. 39% report attending Mass at least weekly and 52% report attending Mass 2 or 3 times a month or more.

Young people are interested in a genuine experience of the transcendent and in a faith that relates to their daily lives. The majority of Catholic youth are somewhat (51%) or very (23%) interested in learning more about their faith. Most Catholic young people report that their religious faith is somewhat (42%), very (31%) and extremely (11%) important in shaping their daily lives and in making important life decisions. 34% of Catholic youth pray daily and 62% pray weekly. 46% report going to confession in the past year. 31% of Catholic youth report feeling either very (22%) or extremely (9%) close to God, while 43% are somewhat close to God.

The Content and Context of Catechesis

Discipleship

Within the ministerial fields (religious educators, school faculties, and youth ministers) a common vision of discipleship is emerging rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) emphasizes discipleship when it states “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in community and intimacy, with Jesus Christ.” (GDC, 80). The bishops emphasize discipleship in the *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005), *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for the Adult Faith Formation in the United States* (1999), the apostolic exhortation on the laity, *Christifideles Laici* (1990), and [their] own reflections in *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995) [where they] envision a laity who are living witnesses [disciples] to Christ: well-formed in faith, enthusiastic, capable of leadership in the Church and in society, filled with compassion, and working for justice.” (Hearts, 30). *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (1997), identifies a goal of ministry to and with and for youth “to empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today.”

The Church’s catechetical and evangelizing ministry to, with, by and for youth is beginning to integrate the reality that catechesis with young people must be systematic and intentional. It is not limited to any one method, nor can anyone method be completely successful. Adolescent catechesis is most effective when it is integrated in and through a variety of methods such as formal religious education programs in parishes, instruction and activities in schools for faith development, justice and service experiences, retreats, sacramental and liturgical experiences, and service opportunities.

Integration and Innovation

Among the many programs and approaches to Adolescent catechesis being used today, the best appear to balance innovation and active engagement of learners while providing a solid foundation in the teachings of the Church. These are typically supported by experiences of Christ through relationships in the home, school and Church. The best coordinators in adolescent catechesis, whether they are religious educators, youth ministers or school teachers recognize that a variety of approaches, methods and strategies are needed to attend well to this component. They affirm that effective catechesis takes place both within and outside the context of a formal classroom. *Renewing the Vision* (1997), the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997), and now the *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005), along with many other documents, have contributed to a more comprehensive approach in our ministry and catechesis with young people integrating the informational, formational and transformational aspects of catechesis.

Successful leaders with youth utilize a variety of settings and formats beyond the regular catechetical classroom or group discussion model including large group events, faith communities in Catholic high schools, small group discussions, mission trips, group service projects, extended activities such as retreats, leadership workshops, and national/international gatherings such as World Youth Day and the National Catholic Youth Conference -providing excellent opportunities for experiences that facilitate conversion to Jesus Christ - the heart of catechesis.

Teachable Moments

Effective adolescent catechesis seizes the teachable moments. It makes use of theological, catechetical, spiritual and personal reflection as well as informal opportunities or *Emmaus-styled* catechetical moments, such as:

- The walk back to the retreat center or at the sporting event,
- The discussion in the cafeteria
- The visit to the hospital
- Personal, family and national or global crises
- The “hang time” at the bus stop, youth center, parking lot
- Vacation Bible School and other youth-led and adult supported catechetical programming"

The U.S. bishops' statement, *Renewing the Vision* reminds us that “the ministry of catechesis fosters growth in Catholic faith in three dimensions—trusting (heart), knowing and believing (mind [head]), and doing (will [hands]).” Within many effective school and parish programs/ministries, this adolescent catechesis is committed to a style that engages “head, heart and hands.”

Strengths of Those Who Catechize and Form Adolescents

Three primary ministerial groupings currently oversee catechetical programs and strategies for young people: parish religious educators, youth ministers, and Catholic school teachers and campus ministers. While religious education and Catholic schools have long been equated with the catechesis of adolescences, youth ministers are now

becoming more recognized for their comprehensive approach to adolescent catechesis. The many committed adults who journey with the young people - parents, catechists, ministers, teachers, moderators of co-curricular activities, even coaches - are also valuable resources.

A strength that Catholic secondary school officials note is that religion teachers (catechists) are trained in the art of teaching and are theologically well educated. According to NCEA research (*Window on Mission*, NCEA 2002), 52% of religion teachers report having a masters in theology, 27% masters in religious studies, 25% masters in religious education, 16% masters in pastoral ministry. 7% have doctorates in theology.

In parish religious education and youth ministry programs there is initial success in training professional leaders through national and diocesan certification programs such as the *master catechist* and the certificate in youth ministry. More data is necessary to give a clearer picture within these two ministerial fields before statistics like those cited with regards to Catholic high school religion teachers are available for parish catechists and youth ministers.

What is known is that successful teachers, whether in Catholic schools, youth ministry or parish catechetical programs, to help youth people connect adolescent life experience and the teachings of the Church. These adult leaders are better trained and more informed about adolescent catechesis than ever before.

Finally, the use of technology holds great promise as a tool to assist Christians live their faith within the global context. Dioceses and national organizations are utilizing the World Wide Web to provide catechetical leaders with resources, examples from past events include website postings in response to the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, the Tsunami Relief Efforts, and on-line catechetical workshops.

Weaknesses that Challenge

Many of the strengths noted above also have corresponding weaknesses that challenge effective adolescent catechesis

Young People and the Challenges of Culture

The *National Study on Youth and Religion* reports that young people are 'incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives.' This was true even for teenagers who regularly attend church. Religion appears to be in the background of their lives, unfocused and implicit, important but not a priority, valued but not invested in, and praised but not describable.

Our young people are inarticulate because we have not taught young people how to talk about their religion or provided opportunities to practice talking about religion and faith. This is a weakness in methodology and opportunity that will not be solved

by rote memorization; rather we need to provide a context in which young people can engage in guided discussions that relate Church teachings and beliefs to their lived experiences.

The *National Study on Youth and Religion* found that religion operates in a weak social structural position compared to other activities and organizations that lay claim to U.S. teenagers' time

When forced to choose between religion activities and other activities, teenagers typically choose other activities. The *National Study on Youth and Religion* hastens to add that it is insufficient to focus on this issue as a matter of personal choice on the part of adolescents. There are larger social and institutional contexts that help shape adolescents' choices, which in turn are shaped by social and cultural forces of individualism, mass-consumer capitalism, the digital communications revolution, to name a few.

The busyness of teen lives is often in conflict with participation in formal catechetical formation outside the Catholic high school setting and Sunday liturgy for all. The full menu of sports and extra curricular activities, as well as family responsibilities and after school jobs, compete for adolescents' time outside school.

Some ministers and teachers note that a breakdown in "community" negatively impacts catechesis. Societal and cultural individualism make instilling the value of community in young people a real challenge.

Young people are consumers in the marketplace of ideas, and there is a risk of losing them to more appealing "products" such as high-powered, well-funded "flashy" approaches adopted by some other Christian churches. By comparison, the great treasure that is Catholic faith can appear "boring" or tired. Many Protestant Churches, too, involve the whole family in Catechesis as an expected part of church participation. Too frequently parents are disengaged from their children's religious education and/or gathered faith community. Yet, through experience we know that building community to be one of the strengths of many a parish and Catholic high school.

Methodological and Praxis Challenges

In terms of methodology, church leaders, including bishops, clergy and lay, express concern that some methods may unintentionally undermine the Church's teaching. They call for a more systematic catechesis for adolescents with a stronger concentration on the teachings and doctrine of the Church and the use of catechetical texts rooted in a systematic approach.

With the exception of the standards set by the National Catholic Education Association through the Assessment of Catechesis/Religious Education (NCEA/ACRE), no benchmarks currently exist to measure the faith knowledge and experience gained within regularly scheduled catechetical sessions.

Where no established objectives exist, defined by grade level or maturity level, there can be inconsistency in catechetical work with young people. Seen as a deficiency, this inconsistency is being addressed by the Bishops' Committee on Catechesis, which is developing doctrinal guidelines for adolescent catechesis.

Furthermore, adolescent catechesis, in some situations is still viewed as a program concerned with providing knowledge of the faith rather than preparing adolescents for a relationship with Christ and the Church and helping young people become disciples.

Few resources exist that promote the integration of the teachings of the church and the experience of faith. Adolescents cannot fully understand their faith unless they are able to wrestle with it and make it their own; to do this they need to both 'know Jesus' and 'know about Jesus.'

From discussions with teachers and ministers many questionable approaches towards adolescent catechesis remain:

- Parishes that operate out of a traditional "high school CCD" model and ignore comprehensive ministry with adolescents.
- Catechetical programs that mimic catechetical programming for children.
- Catechetical efforts that are directed towards the preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation resulting in celebration of the sacrament being perceived as a catechetical graduation.
- *Packaged programming* that lacks adaptation to specific religious, cultural, and ethical developmental needs.
- Adolescent catechesis which does not engage youth in age appropriate theological reflection and fails to relate Church teachings and Tradition to life issues.
- Evaluating catechetical efforts with a disproportionate emphasis on the content of faith as opposed to a more holistic lifelong faith formation.

Challenges for the Youth Ministry Leader

Many youth ministry leaders speak of a need to reclaim the charism of teaching within youth ministry. While youth ministry leaders love dynamic processes and active learning, sometimes when utilizing this approach they do not adequately claim the role of teacher. Those who work with adolescents need to be great teachers who provide dynamic learning combined with solid doctrinal content

Youth ministers, at times, fail to hear concerns about the lack of systematic and intentional catechesis with youth. The field of youth ministry has claimed its strength of informal catechesis and teachable moments, but has not readily addressed the critical needs of parish leaders regarding the overall faith formation for youth.

Challenges for the Catechetical Leader

Catechetical leaders are challenged to understand and appreciate more fully the relationship and intrinsic link among the tasks of comprehensive ministry with youth. A holistic vision includes all eight components for ministry.

Other areas requiring attention for adolescent catechesis include curriculum guidelines for parish programs and recruiting more catechists with religious education certification

Challenges for the High School Religion Teacher/Campus Minister

In discussions within the high school setting some teachers note that catechesis in high schools does not achieve its full potential when it is not connected to daily life and when it is approached solely as an academic subject. Concerns exist within the school setting regarding curriculum that is weak, not seen as the central discipline of the entire school curriculum or foundational to the institutional identity or mission of the school.

A challenge for Catholic high schools, which many meet with great success, is the ability to balance the delicate interrelationship between religion class and campus ministry.

A Common Challenge: Well Trained Catechists

As noted above, while a number of adults who teach and minister with young people are increasingly well-trained professionals with a strong sense of ministry, there is a need to continue to increase these numbers.

Many adults who work with youths feel inadequate teaching Catholic tradition and scripture since they have never received the necessary formation themselves. Many of our ministers and catechists do not have a strong theological formation, creating credibility issues around what they teach.

Catechesis within Immigrant Communities

Adolescents who are first generation immigrants have special needs as they face integrating the culture of their homeland with the dominant culture of the United States. In some parts of the country it is difficult to find adult catechists in immigrant communities who are sufficiently proficient in English and who have the ability to gather immigrant youth in culturally appropriate ways. In these environments, there is a critical lack of catechetical training materials for adult catechists who do not speak English.

The Role of the Parents

The *National Study on Youth and Religion* reports that the best social predictor of the religious and spiritual life of a teenager is the religious and spiritual life of the parents. The extended family and other significant adults certainly have impact, but parents are most important in forming their children's religious lives.

Adolescent Catechesis - Opportunities for the Future

Church leaders working together can improve the delivery and effectiveness of adolescent catechesis. In some dioceses multiple models of catechesis are beginning to be recognized as a viable approach to faith formation. Many parishes find great success at being creative with the curriculum and challenge catechetical and youth leaders to expand their own understanding of effective catechesis. As we move forward we build on years of Church teaching, tradition and praxis.

Young People Today

Young people who experience a thirst for a deeper spiritual life and knowledge of their faith provide a basis for future development. We know from experience and conversations that mature adolescents desire to learn and apply their faith to life experiences. They exhibit an outpouring of sincerity. This is evident on retreats, in their commitment to the parish, in classrooms, in commitment to the school community, and through advocacy for justice and peace.

Content and Methodology

Improving the faith formation of adults will assist the church to provide adults who can be mentors to young people. Mentors need to be caring adults who, while continuing their own faith and spiritual formation, accompany youth and sponsor them toward maturity in the lived reality of the Catholic faith. The RCIA, especially the role of sponsors/ godparents, provides a model for mentoring youth.

The interest, energy, and commitment of parishes for intergenerational faith formation and whole community catechesis present numerous opportunities for faith formation for adolescents. Parishes around the country are implementing intergenerational faith formation as their primary model and are developing lifelong and event-centered approaches to learning. There is an alignment of this paradigm with our other ministries to and with youth that can allow for innovative and dynamic collaboration.

We have an opportunity to explore multiple approaches for catechesis, including individualized learning models, family-based models, intergenerational learning models, and innovations in gathered learning models for adolescents.

The internet and other technologies can be used to reach adolescents in an effective way. The age-old truths and traditions of our faith can be presented in a crisp and fresh manner online.

Many service requirements in both school and parish catechetical programs provide opportunities where youth leaders can intersect faith, education and citizenship.

We have the opportunity to examine the research that has been accomplished about religious education, adolescent spiritual formation, and effective youth ministry. A

variety of projects, most notably the *National Study on Youth and Religion*, with total funding of millions of dollars have recently studied adolescent catechesis and its broader context. This research points to the gaps in formation and the needed innovations in pastoral practice. Information on all aspects of adolescence is important in that faith formation is not just about learning our Catholic Faith but also applying it through acts of service, social justice, prayer, and community.

The National Certification Standards shared by a number of national organizations provide an excellent articulation of the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed by lay ecclesial ministers, especially those who serve adolescents. These organizations, and others with their own standards, should continue to work together to implement standards and advocate for their use in dioceses. There is an opportunity for these organizations to work together to create a national certification process for lay ecclesial ministers. Such a process would help to raise the bar on the quality and competence of youth ministry leaders and parish catechetical leaders, and thus promote more effective ministry in the area of adolescent catechesis.

Within Catholic schools standards exist in many dioceses for teachers of religious studies. Some of these could be models for the above certification process. The tradition of adapting to local norms and needs has a rich history in the church in the United States. As a faith community, that diversity enhances us.

Creating Organizational Structures for Effective Adolescent Catechesis

Presently, adolescent catechesis is the responsibility of the offices of youth ministry, Catholic education, catechesis/faith formation, or pastoral services or shared between two or more offices. A common vision and understanding of adolescent catechesis among the catechetical, schools and youth ministry communities can create a focused coordination leading to clarity and progress towards effective catechesis and faith formation.

While these multiple practices can create confusion, it is an opportunity for extraordinary collaboration if there is clarity of responsibility and communication of that responsibility. The challenge occurs as each “responsible” leader develops programming from their unique scope of experience. While this may lead to “turf” wars or a passive disregard of the catechetical needs of adolescents it need not. Collaboration between youth ministers and catechetical leaders in the development of comprehensive approaches to adolescent catechesis can and does work effectively.

Threats to Success

The *National Study on Youth and Religion* states that “our distinct impression is that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the United States are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth.” The study states specifically that the Catholic Church lacks the institutional commitment at the parish and diocesan level in the religious formation of young people.

Further, the study concludes that the greater the availability of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, and opportunities for teenagers, the more likely teenagers are to be religiously engaged and invested. In other words, “congregations that prioritize youth ministry and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents seem much more likely to draw young people into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their young members”.

Stated negatively, churches that do not invest in their youth will find youth unlikely to invest in them. “The analysis shows that the presence of a full time youth minister in the congregation, compared to no designated youth minister at all, significantly increases those teens (who attend on their own without parents) attendance.” However, the *National Study on Youth and Religion* found that only 21% of Catholic parishes employed full time youth ministry coordinators.

“...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.” (*National Study on Youth and Religion*, 2004).

An underlying threat identified in the *National Study on Youth and Religion* is that teenagers tend to espouse a religious outlook that is distinct from the traditional faith commitments of most U.S. religious traditions—an outlook that can be described as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” This outlook serves as a “default position” for adolescent religiosity when religious communities’ engagement and education of youth is weak. It may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic mass-consumer capitalist society. Moralistic, therapeutic deism is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.

Moralistic, therapeutic deism is a belief in a mostly-distant God - one who exists, who created the world and defines our general moral order, but who is not particularly personally involved in the world. This new, underlying civil religion is inherently individualistic, emphasizing a vertical spirituality characterized by an individual’s relationship with God and the benefit that an individual receives from such a relationship. Totally lacking is a sense of the communal or horizontal dimension of spirituality that emphasizes worship, service and justice, and participation in a faith community.

How We Work Together

It will take a well coordinated effort on the part of all the major players in adolescent catechesis to fully implement the NDC for adolescents. The perceived lack of communication and mutual understanding between religious educators, youth ministers, and Catholic school faculty sometimes seen in the church’s approach to

adolescent catechesis must cease. Increased cooperation between these groups of catechists is an essential goal.

Another threat to success is the financial and personnel resources needed for effective adolescent catechesis. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, the fallout of the priest sex abuse scandal and budget realignments, many parishes and dioceses are not able to commit adequate resources (financial, personnel, time) to adolescent catechesis.

Conclusion

The *National Study on Youth and Religion* concludes that congregations that prioritize its work with youth and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents seem much more likely to draw young people into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their young members. Rarely has a generation of young people been so interested in spirituality and religion and so open to experiences of the holy and the transcendent.

Our pastoral ministry with young people in parish and school settings requires a comprehensive vision of adolescent catechesis; a practical blueprint for developing an effective catechetical program with varied formats, settings, and approaches; and the resources, trained personnel, and financial support to implement our vision. It will take a well coordinated effort on the part of all those who provide catechesis for adolescents to live up to the potential described above and counter the ever present threats.

This appears to be a kairos moment - the right moment - for the Catholic Church and her pastoral ministry to, with and for young people to take the lead in providing for the spiritual formation of young people. This article is a first step toward making this a reality. Change, however, will require the practitioners in the field in all areas of responsibility for adolescents to review these materials and act upon them. The three national organizations responsible for this article stand willing to work together to create systems and structures to help the Church respond to this important issue at this critical time.

Questions for Reflection

- After reading this condensed article, in what ways do you concur with this summary?
- In what ways does your experience differ from this analysis?

The Collaborative Committee will be offering subsequent commissioned papers to this publication to advance a national conversation.

Resource

National Study of Youth and Religion: Analysis of the Population of Catholic Teenagers and Their Parents, National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2004, Washington, D.C.

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