

Forming Young Disciples: Are We Asking the Right Questions?

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This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.
For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.
Matthew 13:13-16*

I have a dear friend, Kay Schindler, whose grandson Micah enlisted in the Air Force right out of high school. Still in basic training, one day he was feeling poorly, went to the clinic and was given some cold medicine, then joined his unit for a long hike on a hot day. The medics on the hike had been well-instructed that the conventional remedy for struggling hikers is more water. So when he began to lag behind, the medics advised him, “Drink more water.” Which he did. He continued to struggle, and they again told him, “Drink!” Which he dutifully did, and hiked on. He struggled even more, so his leaders exhorted him to keep up, which he tried mightily to do, and he drank even more water. He finally collapsed, unconscious and unresponsive.

Two days later, at the age of 18, Airman Micah Schindler died. The official cause of death: water toxicity. He had ingested so much water, in compliance with conventional wisdom and the orders of his superiors, that it killed him. He literally died from too much of a good thing. He became a heartbreaking casualty of conventional thinking.

Could it be, as a priest friend of mine once suggested, that the greatest obstacle to the next wonderful thing God has in store is in fact the last wonderful thing that God has given? That our assumptions and expectations have been so powerfully shaped by what we have seen and lived that we have selective vision and hearing, as the Isaiah reading suggests? Could it be that our collective conventional wisdom about adolescent catechesis has grown toxic to the best of what may be next in store for those with eyes to see and ears to hear?



Consider: in *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith speculates in his chapter on Catholic teens that the following are responsible for the very poor showing of Catholics in the NSYR:

- Catholic upward mobility and mainstream acculturation undermines the vitality of the church.
- Catholic school and CCD no longer effectively serve as primary vehicles for education, formation, and ministry.
- Youth evangelization and formation are a low institutional priority at the parish and diocesan level.
- Catholic teenagers significantly reflect the relative religious laxity of their parents.

Note that nowhere in his assessment of what ails us Catholics does he mention inadequate catechetical materials, ineffective catechetical curricula and models, or ill-conceived catechetical methodology and methods.

And yet we Catholics here in the U.S., whose predominant historical framework for our self-understanding is the school and the classroom, default even here in the Symposium to an intensive examination of adolescent catechesis fairly narrowly conceived, as if we could fix this problem of ours by adjusting our catechetical approaches, models, methods, and materials. Could it be that our difficulties actually lie

elsewhere, and that if we only had “eyes that see and ears that hear” we might perceive what they are? Albert Einstein once said that no problem was ever solved by the consciousness that created it. Perhaps we need a fresh look, a new consciousness?

Notre Dame church historian Scott Appleby, in a presentation to Catholic media leaders in October 2002, said this: “. . . No previous generation of American Catholics inherited so little of the content and sensibility of the faith from their parents, as have today’s Catholic youth The challenge of Catholic education and formation in our media-driven, cyberspace age is no less than this: older Catholics must be restored to, and younger Catholics introduced to, a sense of Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life.”

Note that he does not suggest a different, better, more productive classroom experience or youth ministry program. Rather, he prescribes restoration of and introduction to “Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life.”

Yet, over the past 50-75 years, the societal and cultural institutions that formerly supported



“Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life” have incrementally disintegrated and virtually disappeared without much notice or effect on our assumptions and conventional practices:

- Our neighborhoods are, with few exceptions no longer homogeneous ethnic Catholic ghettos.
- With few exceptions, our schools no longer exist to teach English to immigrants or to provide them the knowledge and tools they need to merge into mainstream American culture.
- The media, which once reinforced conventional values about honesty, sexual morality, and the value of life, have been transformed into a vast, powerful and ubiquitous smorgasbord of relativism, conveying virtually every imaginable value system.
- The Catholic parish, which once functioned as the non-negotiable center of Catholic life, where Catholics went for entertainment, community, prayer, athletics, support, worship, wisdom and guidance for life, is now just one option among many.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our extended and immediate families, which formerly were almost assuredly monolithically Catholic (with siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins virtually all Catholic) are now for many an amalgamation of religiosities, spiritualities, Christian denominations, and differing faiths.

In other words, 50+ years ago all that religious educators needed to serve up was a cognitive understanding and language for what literally permeated the lives of most Catholics, at home, in the neighborhood, at school, in the parish, and in the immediate and extended family. Now we expect religious education and youth ministry to provide what was formerly supported and sustained by multiple and mutually-supporting societal institutions. It is as though our house for years had gradually deteriorated around us without our taking much notice. One day we awaken to find wind and water pouring in, and lay the blame on our lack of umbrellas.

Parenthetically, this analysis is not mine. Many of you I am sure recognized it as Dr. John Westerhoff’s in his book, *Will Our Children*

Have Faith?, written more than three decades ago. As Westerhoff and Appleby bookend this current era in which we are blessed to live as leaders in the U.S. Catholic Church, we are faced with serious choices: do we “see and hear” that in fact we do not have a catechetical problem so much as we have an ecclesial one? Consider: Are our Catholic teens, who according to the *NSYR* are “remarkably inarticulate” about their faith, simply symptomatic of more profound deficiencies? Are more and better youth ministry, catechesis, and religious instruction good and helpful yet utterly inadequate correctives?

Put bluntly: has our default preoccupation with conventional religious education blinded us to more profound deficits in our ecclesial life that too often render our catechetical efforts impotent? Is the faith formation system we have inherited, which developed in response to a different set of cultural and societal circumstances (e.g., setting poor, Catholic, European immigrants on a trajectory toward economic prosperity), what we need now? Or do we need to rethink what we do so as to “. . . restore Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life for our Catholic parents and their children?” The following are humbly offered as possible elements of a reconceptualized faith formation system:

Parents Are Primary

The *NSYR* reinforces what our documents have said consistently over the years, that parents are primary in forming the faith of their children:

“Parents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example”.¹

“Parents are the most influential agents of catechesis for their children. They have a unique responsibility for the education of their children; they are the first educators, or catechists”.²

“. . . the Christian community must give very special attention to parents. By means of personal contact, meetings, courses and also adult catechesis directed toward parents, the Christian community must help them assume

their responsibility—which is particularly delicate today—of educating their children in the faith”.³

If parents are primary, obviously everything else is of lower priority. Yet the investment of our energy, creativity and resources tells a different story, namely that religion classes or youth ministry programs are our church’s primary catechetical delivery systems, not parents.

If indeed parents are their children’s primary religious educators, and *our church programs exist to support them*, then we ought to be discussing at great length and depth inventive approaches to equipping parents for this indispensable task. (Note that this is not equivalent to “adult faith formation” but is a strategy to help parents effectively apprentice their children in the faith throughout childhood and adolescence into young adulthood).

Since we can no longer assume that parents have been evangelized or well-catechized, such approaches would likely include but not be limited to evangelizing efforts that are responsive to the stages and struggles of parenting. For instance, imagine Engaged Encounter or Pre-Cana on steroids: an investment of our very best talents and resources *where they will make the most difference: evangelizing and enriching the faith of parents in preparation for their vital role in shaping the faith of their children*.

Then consider rethinking our sacramental practices *so the emphasis is on what happens **after** the sacrament*, not in preparation for it. For instance, the celebration of matrimony would no longer be the culmination and endpoint of preparations, but the starting point for ongoing mentoring and preparation for living and rearing children in the Catholic faith as a comprehensive way of life. Similarly, baptism, confirmation, first reconciliation and first Eucharist would trigger ongoing parent preparation, support, training and resources for the next phase of their mission to form young disciples.

Imagine if we invested our institutional resources and talent into providing parents the resources,

support, mentoring and programming that would assist them in building the domestic church: What would be the effect on their children into their adolescent years and beyond? If we did so, perhaps we would be sharing at this Symposium stories about our kids’ missionary work rather than mulling over whether they will have faith at all.

Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy

It is *the* place where we Catholics gather to be formed in the faith. Our documents say so, and it is the truth: it is truly our “source and summit.” Yet sadly we can no longer assume that either parents or their children “get” Sunday Mass. Perhaps we should be investing our very best energies in excellent liturgical catechesis, as well as working to ensure that every Sunday Eucharistic liturgy—not just a special youth Mass—is vibrant, inclusive of all, and well-prepared, with homily and music that lead all, including parents and their children, into “full, active and conscious participation”? If we are saying to parents that it is their responsibility to get kids to church on Sunday, surely it is our responsibility to ensure that once there we will have done our very best to welcome and engage them and their kids.

An important clarification: by “vibrant liturgy” I do not mean turning the sacred liturgy into

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entertainment. First and foremost it means *the faith of the assembly is vibrant*, with all, including parents and their children, coming to the liturgy with the “proper dispositions”⁴.

Parish Renewal

Soul Searching suggests that adolescent faith is not only a barometer of the faith of parents, but also a bellwether of the quality of the lived faith of a given parish. Should we, in this forum, be discussing the vitality of our parishes, and how

that vitality might be enhanced? Both the *GDC* and the *NDC* are clear on the connection between the faith of young people and the lived faith modeled not only by parents but by the faith community. As *Renewing the Vision* declares: "It takes a whole Church . . ."5. The fruitfulness of our efforts at adolescent faith formation depends in great part on their context.

Athletics (and scouting, band, theater, etc.): Most kids spend exponentially more time on athletic fields, in gymnasiums and weight rooms than in any religious education or faith formation program. If our coaches under Catholic auspices understood their roles principally as formers of Catholic faith and Christian character, what a powerful impact they would have on the faith of young people! How about a national "Catholic Coaches as Catechists" initiative, with the resources behind it to really make a difference? Similarly, leaders of scouting programs, band leaders, theater directors, and others can have a profound effect on the faith of the young people they mentor if they bring the vision and skills of discipleship to their roles. Consider that we have a vast cadre of catechists already recruited and in place *where kids are*, if we can only help them awaken to this role and impart the skills and confidence to live it well.

Electronic Communications, Social Networking, and Virtual Online Communities

The question is: Will they be evangelized by us, or by the electronic world and culture they inhabit, with its ubiquitous and powerful marketing?

If we who grew up with 8-tracks and were wowed by our first microwave ovens do not attend to the explosion of electronic communications, social networking and virtual online communities, we are blind to the "signs of the times." "Our kids are being evangelized every day, hour by hour," as my good friend Frank Mercadante is fond of saying. The question is: Will they be evangelized by us, or by the electronic world and culture they inhabit, with its ubiquitous and powerful marketing? If we

are serious about adolescent catechesis, we had better invest serious resources in raising up young catechetical leaders who themselves effortlessly bring the latest electronic gear and God together.

Full-Time, Well Trained Parish Youth Ministers

The *NSYR* reveals that Catholic parishes lag far behind other denominations in investing in full-time, well trained youth ministers. At home in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati there are so-called Protestant megachurches (that in fact are roughly equivalent in size to our larger parishes and in competition with them for members) that:

- Enjoy the services not just of a youth minister, but have youth ministry staffs with multiple, trained personnel who enjoy generous administrative support
- Have made enormous investments of money and staff resources to capitalize on electronic media
- Have invested in youth gathering spaces that powerfully convey the message: *you are important here!*

In other words, they have invested sufficient resources so as to guarantee the highest quality adolescent church/faith experience possible. Yet in many of our Catholic parishes youth ministry and adolescent catechesis for teens are almost nonexistent, or are under funded, or led by volunteers with spotty preparation. And of course, when there are cutbacks, the youth minister is usually the first to go.

In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati we have picked up on Scott Appleby's terminology and we talk about youth ministry this way: Youth ministry is not youth club, icebreakers, ski trips, hayrides, dances, etc. (i.e., potentially toxic conventional thinking), but *youth ministry is a strategy for restoring Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life for young people, through a network of cooperative activity in schools, parishes, families and the civic community, in pursuit of discipleship, participation, and growth.*

“Restoring Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life” is a tall order, even for a youth ministry leader who brings breadth and depth of education, specialized training, and experience to the table. We need a cohort of youth ministry leaders who understand that their role is not “to run the youth group” (more conventional, toxic thinking!), but *to restore Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life not only for young people but for their parents as well* in close cooperation with the pastor and all the other pastoral ministers in the parish.

Our Catholic Schools

A parent at a high school graduation picnic last May shared with me his heartfelt concerns about his graduating son, and all of his children who had been educated in Catholic schools through grade twelve. Although pleased with what his children had experienced and learned there, he deplored the fact that their Catholic schools, especially their Catholic high schools, had served as an ecclesial “off ramp,” sending his kids on a path away from the parish. He worried aloud about where they would end up in their late twenties and early thirties, when the somewhat artificial and temporary communities of high school and college were no more: what would they be left with? He lamented that the Catholic high school had become a substitute for the parish, and that his kids do not “get” the parish the way he did growing up. For him, the parish had been a central fixture of his adolescence; for his kids, it had become optional and dispensable.



Catholic high schools that were originally conceived as a cooperative venture at the service of Catholic parishes have largely lost their connection with them. Even more sobering,

schools are often in direct competition with parishes for the time, talent, energies and commitment of young people.

As proponents of Catholic catechesis, do we need to rethink the role of the Catholic secondary school in the economy of our ecclesial life? Do our schools establish young people on a trajectory toward Catholic, Christian discipleship and active engagement in the Catholic Church, or not? If so, might they do so even more effectively? If not, what indeed is their purpose, and what is their impact on our other Catholic institutions that do have discipleship as their mission?

Are We the (Only) Right People for the Job?

One might argue that none of the items mentioned so far falls exclusively within the purview of adolescent faith formation and catechesis, as conventionally conceived—and one would be absolutely correct. So we must ask who else ought to be part of this conversation about adolescent catechesis. I would name diocesan family life offices; leaders of Catholic extracurriculars like athletics, scouting, theater, band, etc.; experts in evangelization and parish renewal, liturgists and music directors, parents and grandparents, stewardship and development leaders, parish staffs and pastors, youth and young adults.

Sadly, our narrow ministry specializations (silos?) frequently serve to confine our thinking, narrow our imaginations, prevent important information from surfacing, and limit the scope of any inspired efforts we might devise. Many of our parishes and dioceses operate like businesses whose organizational subunits do not talk to one another, much less plan and work together. If the analysis presented above is on target, our future will demand that we abandon our (toxic?) ministry turfs, and begin to make interoffice and interdepartmental collaboration the norm. Indeed, it seems that collaboration is longer optional but a prerequisite for our survival, because the issues we face are systemic ones that demand broad based, strategic responses.

Here are some questions for our consideration based on this assessment of the challenges we face together:

- How can we make parent formation for Catholic child rearing our highest priority, with the necessary commitment of energy, resources and talent?
- How can we ensure that our Catholic worship (especially Sunday Mass) is vibrant, welcoming, and inclusive of parents and youth, particularly by developing in them the “proper dispositions?”
- How can we make significant strides towards broad based parish renewal and revitalization, so parishes serve as the authentic and faith-filled contexts for adolescent faith formation?
- How can we partner with Catholic leaders of athletics and other extracurriculars so as to help them mentor our children in our Catholic faith?
- What will it take for us to maximize our use of electronic communications, social networking and virtual online communities as a means for discipleship, participation, and growth?
- How can we significantly increase the number of full-time parish youth ministers who understand their mission to be “restoring Catholicism as a comprehensive way of life” and whose primary job it is to catalyze our faith communities around the goals of youth ministry, not just “lead a youth group?”
- What will it take for our Catholic schools, especially our secondary schools, to better partner with parishes in developing young disciples?
- Who else should be seated around these tables with us? Who else must we collaborate with back home, if we are to make any headway at all?
- And finally: what will we need to let go of to allow sufficient resources, imagination, and creativity to be unleashed so something new can emerge?

These are humbly and respectfully offered as starting points for conversation, and are no way intended to be the definitive list, much less the final word.

Airman Micah Schindler died by ingesting too much of what he thought (and everyone thought) he needed more of to survive. I submit for your prayerful consideration that our narrow focus on adolescent religious formation in its conventional forms may be toxic as well: particularly if it addresses symptoms and not causes. It was hot, he was perspiring, and exerting himself: of course he needed more water! Our kids are remarkably inarticulate about their faith, so of course we need more curricula, more textbooks, more orthodoxy, more classes, and more religious instruction!

Yet if their “benign whateverism” towards faith is indeed symptomatic of deeper, more profound challenges that demand other kinds of responses, perhaps our narrowly circumscribed efforts in adolescent catechesis may themselves be a kind of toxic substitute for what we really need. Not that they are toxic in and of themselves, but in the sense that they can distract and divert us from what would really make a difference in the lives of young people and their families. Too much of a good thing can be toxic and even fatal, as Micah and his family discovered the day after he collapsed. Perhaps we are learning the same thing. If so, let us hope we learn it soon enough to make a difference.

About the Author

Sean Reynolds is director of the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry. Sean brings over twenty-five years of youth ministry experience to his role in the archdiocese. A Cincinnati native, Sean earned a bachelor’s in theology from Xavier University, a master’s in community and organizational development from Loyola University of Chicago, and a certificate of advanced studies in youth ministry from the Center for Ministry Development (Naugatuck, Connecticut). He served for seven years as director of the Youth Retreat and Internship Program at the Jesuit Renewal Center (now Milford Spiritual Center). He is currently on the Board of Directors of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Commission on Certification and Accreditation. A frequent trainer and workshop presenter at national conferences, Sean is the author of a new book, *Multiply the Ministry*, published by Saint Mary’s Press.



Endnotes

Parents Are Primary

¹Canon Law Society of America. *Code of Canon Law* (Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana) 1983, section 774.2.

²United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2005), page 234.

³General Directory for Catechesis. *Citta del Vaticano*, 1997. (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference) 1998, page 227.

Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy

⁴Pope Paul VI. 1963. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1963), no. 11.

⁵United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Vision* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing 1997), page 19.