

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT CATECHESIS



From Education to Transformation

St. John Bosco, the patron saint of working with youth, was known not only for how he taught the boys about the faith but how he *formed* them in the faith. John Paul II, in his letter *Iuvenum Patris*, wrote that St. John Bosco's concern for the evangelization of his boys 'was not limited to catechesis alone, nor to liturgy alone, nor to those religious practices which call for an explicit exercise of faith and lead to it, but covered the whole vast sector of the youth condition.'¹

A comprehensive approach

St John Bosco did not only want his students to succeed in faith; he wanted them also to succeed in *life*. He knew that leading the boys to holiness required an orthodox curriculum. And he saw that it required other things as well. It involved him in building community, in job training, in involvement in government, in a whole range of social interactions, in finding the boys a place to live, and so on.

The *National Directory for Catechesis*, released by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, seems to agree with the saint's vision. 'The most effective catechetical programs for adolescents are integrated into a comprehensive program of pastoral ministry for youth that includes catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship.'²

The phrase 'comprehensive program' and the list of components involved came out of *Renewing the Vision*, a USCCB document about youth ministry. Some wondered, 'Are the bishops saying only youth ministry can do effective catechesis? Can nothing be done in the classroom anymore?'

Of course not. We know that what happens in the classroom is extremely important. The bishops are simply saying that the classroom isn't enough on its own. Catholic schools cannot put the entire burden of conversion on a classroom experience a student has for 50 minutes a day. It must be shared and supported by what students learn in other classes, liturgical celebrations, service opportunities, and pastoral support from lay, religious, and ordained ministers. Whether in the parish or the school, effective catechesis must be supported by other components of a comprehensive pastoral ministry for youth.

Connecting the dots

One might argue that this statement would hold true for any age, but psychologists tell us it is particularly important for teenagers. When you speak to an adult about the faith, they will often consider the ramifications of it in their lives. But teenagers have a harder time 'connecting the dots'.

'At times, adolescents are treated as more adult-like (e.g., on a job) whereas at other times, they are treated as more child-like (e.g., with parents at home)... The young adolescent is not yet troubled by what could be viewed as inconsistent self-representations because he or she cannot simultaneously evaluate them as contradictory. However, there are liabilities associated with this inability. The compartmentalization of abstractions about the self precludes the construction of an integrated portrait of self.'³

This explains why a young person might be the best kid in the youth group and the smartest kid in the classroom, but also the biggest partier on Saturday night or completely rebellious to his parents. Teens don't see that as a lack of integrity. They just don't have an integrated picture of who they are, and so they adapt to their surroundings.

Integration

How do we help them integrate faith into their everyday lives? The short answer is: by becoming a part of it. John Paul II told us that,

*'The true educator therefore shares the life of the young, is interested in their problems, tries to become aware of how they see things, takes part in their sporting and cultural activities and in their conversations; as a mature and responsible friend he sketches out for them ways and means of doing good, he is ready to intervene to solve problems, to indicate criteria, to correct with prudent and loving firmness blameworthy judgments and behavior. In this atmosphere of 'pedagogical presence' the educator is not looked upon as a "superior," but as a "father, brother and friend."'*⁴

St. John Bosco was able to live with the youth he ministered to. Few of us have that luxury. However, although we can't experience every aspect of their lives, we can bring their lives, hopes, dreams, and experiences into the faith we share with them. When we model in their culture what we teach in catechesis, this is when education becomes transformation.

Notes

1. John Paul II, *Iuvenum Patris*, 15
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 48.
3. Dante Cicchetti and Donald J. Cohen, *Developmental Psychopathology: Theory and Method*
4. John Paul II, *Iuvenum Patris*, 12

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