

Sins, Saints, Sacraments & Stations: What to Teach in Postmodern Times?
Determining Content for Adult Religious Education

Abstract: Cultural postmodernity offers a number of positive characteristics that can support the practice of “sharing Christian faith” with others. Drawing on these, this timely article responds to the potentially confusing question “*What shall we teach?*” in adult faith formation. It offers practical guidelines for a curriculum that might nurture adults in discipleship and holiness of life, and suggests that Catholic spiritual practices are essential in sustaining a vibrant faith-life “over the long haul.”

A few years ago, while car-bound during an hour’s drive into D.C., I found myself having “The Dreaded Conversation.” For a number of months, I had watched her struggle, noting her growing self-consciousness. She was beginning to wonder about “It,” yet felt ashamed of her naïveté, embarrassed to show even passing interest much less acknowledge her sudden insatiable curiosity. I had observed from a distance, not wanting to burst the innocence bubble before its time. But once awakened, her imagination could not be tamed, and one-on-one time in the car ride with “someone experienced” proved to be the tipping point. Turning to me with a small voice, my sophisticated, educated and rather worldly neighbor asked, “Do you think Noah really found two mosquitoes and put them on that ark?”

For many adults, discussing matters of faith can be just as difficult as talking about sex to a teen, and just as easily “bubble-bursting”! But for religious educators and those in pastoral ministry, conversations around faith—its *content*, its *praxis*, its *prayerful expression*—can be potentially life-giving for those on both sides of the conversation. For someone seeking understanding, the ideas and explanations offered by a pastoral minister or educator and the attitude with which they are presented could “make or break” their

experience of God and church, and their desire to participate in any form of Catholic ecclesial life. Deciding *what* to share and *how* to share it are therefore foundational pastoral and educational concerns and a particular challenge in our postmodern times.

Postmodernity: What's the Fuss?

Questions surrounding faith and faith-practices are not easily addressed at any time, but today they are more complex because the cultural ethos of postmodernity encourages the rejection of any number of “sureties.” Among the challenges this ethos can present to those involved in faith-based ministry are the counterforce of pluralism on an overarching Christian story (a “meta-narrative” that postmodernism assures us no longer exists), the co-opting of religion by a solely therapeutic approach to pastoral needs (Smith, 55-74), and the radical relativism evident in the widespread belief that “one religion is as good as the next.” All this can create confusion and uncertainty for those interested in sharing Christian faith with others, notwithstanding the assets that postmodernity can bring to a dialogue between faith and culture. As first century Saint Justin Martyr put it, all cultures have their sins and shortcomings, as well as their graces and “seeds of the word.” In the midst of such complexity, what of cultural postmodernity can be a fruitful grounding for contemporary religious education?

Paradoxically, the “foundationless, relativistic and alienated context” (Schneiders, 12) that cultural postmodernity represents for some, has also highlighted a universal hunger for “the more.” In his April 2008 visit to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged the possibility that universal hungers and universal truths co-exist in our

contemporary culture. He referred to a secularism that “can subtly reduce religious belief to the lowest common denominator,” And he reminded us that the Church can offer “an attractive and true answer, intellectually and practically, to real human problems...to a society that offers any number of recipes for human fulfilment.” In a particular way, postmodernity has uncovered this desire for fulfillment, for transcendent experience beyond life’s “lowest common denominators,” for meaning, direction and values.

Thus, perhaps more than recent generations, postmoderns openly acknowledge their hunger for mystery, have a new sense of humility in face of human progress, and desire greater authenticity and reliability. This bodes well for sharing Christian *content*. Postmoderns yearn for connection, desire a community of participation, are willing to acknowledge interdependence and display a sensitivity to social justice. These attitudes indicate possibilities for inviting them to Christian ecclesial *praxis*. Postmoderns candidly admit their woundedness and their need for healing and reconciliation, their desire to uphold non-materialistic values such as silence and wonder, and their attraction to contemplation and worship. This reality offers hope for participation in Christianity’s opportunities for *prayerful expression*.

In fact, “postmoderns do not seek to be wholly self-directed individuals, but rather “whole persons” (Grenz,14). This is good news. It suggests that the time is ripe for a renewed, holistic approach to Christian ministry and education that will respond to cultural postmodernity’s evident spiritual inclination, and provide a specifically Christian religious context for this spiritual receptivity.

So Many Books, So Little Time

While maximizing the many positive supports that cultural postmodernity offers for instructing adults in Catholic tradition, religious educators and pastoral ministers face the question of determining content guidelines for adult religious education settings. In children's religious education programs, curriculum requirements and guidelines are the norm. However, adult faith formation typically lacks an officially pre-determined structure or configuration, although parishes would do well to craft the overall "scope and sequence" of their program. Without this, those who agree to lead formation sessions with adults may be greeted with, "So glad you'll be teaching our ten week session! Here's a list of recommended books; pick one that appeals to you. You won't have time to cover the whole book, so just aim for the basics."

Left to choose their own materials and create their own courses, adult educators may feel at a loss. "With so little time available, how do I decide what to share? How do I know what's imperative, what's secondary? Trinity, saints, Incarnation, indulgences: how much or how little emphasis to give? What guidelines can I use? How do I evaluate which resources will further a life-giving experience of the Christian message, and which might be left aside?" Responding to these kinds of questions is made more difficult still by a plethora of resources readily available, all claiming to be an adequate presentation of the faith for adult learners and learning communities. *What's an educator to do?*

The response to "*What shall we teach?*" mirrors the complexities of postmodernity, with many possibilities and few definitive conclusions. Even the Nicene Creed, normative for Christians and potentially an answer for "what to teach," omits mention of

several central tenets of Christian faith, such as sin, Eucharist, priesthood, and, interestingly, ecclesiastical authority (Johnson, 64-64). So, while the Creeds of faith offer guidelines, we need to look for further direction in the area of content choice. The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* covers four primary areas of the tradition—doctrine, liturgy, ethical praxis and prayer—and is intended as a reference for bishops, pastors and catechists in crafting local educational curriculum. Yet the *Catechism* itself acknowledges “various situations and cultures” that call for special consideration and adaptation in using its material with the faithful (John Paul II, 6). Likewise, the *Catechism* presents as its object “the whole of the Revelation of the mystery of Christ” and refers to a “hierarchy of truths” (n. 90) that reflects the different emphasis granted to various teachings, depending on their relative proximity to or distance from the central mysteries of the Christian faith. Nowhere in the *Catechism*, however, can one find a checklist for these teachings.

In 1999, the US Bishops issued *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*. This statement, echoing the 1998 *General Directory for Catechesis*, lists six dimensions of the Christian life without which “the Christian faith does not attain full development” (GCD, n. 87). Along with the four primary areas found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the statement includes two additional areas: communal life and missionary spirit (USCC, 68).

So, What to Teach?

These various directives regarding potential topics indicate that, indeed, there are non-negotiables to consider when deciding what makes for reliable adult catechesis. Certain truths represent the more fundamental basis upon which an adequate religious instruction is built. Just as the US bishops took the four primary areas of the Catechism and allowed two more areas to “ripple forth” from the center of this catechetical pond, so religious educator Thomas Groome has “continued the ripple” that expands from this center by naming eight “depth structures” as foundations for guiding content choices, especially by way of forming people in Catholic identity. By continuing the practice of “furthering the ripple,” Groome offers additional insights that might be useful in appealing to today’s postmodern seekers. Here, the concern is not only to honor the tradition, but also, as Aquinas and many throughout Church tradition have advised, to communicate it “according to the mode of the receiver.”

While each of these depth structures can be found under the six dimensions named in *Our Hearts Were Burning...* (in the same way that the six dimensions can be found under the four primary areas of the *Catechism*), their further expansion and fresh representation may spark the imaginations of religious educators and pastoral ministers, providing new visions for offering an appealing presentation of Catholic faith. I briefly sketch these depth structures here. (For a more complete explanation of the “depth structures,” see Groome’s cited works.) Those entrusted with sharing faith with others may find these essential components helpful when deciding “what to teach.”

Eight “Depth Structures” of the Christian Faith

1. *Scripture and Tradition:* as Catholics, we see these as complimentary fountains of wisdom that have enriched our living as disciples from the beginning and continue to do so today. Drawing from these sources, the voices of the magisterium (the official teaching function of the church), theologians (those with the task of finding ever more relevant ways to appropriate the faith) and the “sensus fidelium” (the belief consensus of the larger Christian community) continue to dialogue together at the service of “faith seeking understanding.” Anything taught as “Christian Faith” must faithfully represent the constitutive faith reflected in both Scripture and Christian tradition.
2. *Community:* the Church is the Body of Christ, and as baptized members, we belong to this universal community. We cannot “go it alone,” but we come to God with and through one another as the People of God, and part of the communion of saints: those who have gone before us and those who will come after us. So, all curricula should emphasize the crucial role of the Church in the work of salvation, and help to nurture people’s ecclesial identity.
3. *Sacramentality:* Catholics enjoy a rich sensory experience of the in-breaking of God into our world through heightened moments we call the seven sacraments. In addition, a sense of “sacramentality” allows us to celebrate the mediation of God’s presence through transcendent experiences of “the more” in our everyday lives. Catechesis should reflect the central place of the sacraments

and the principle of sacramentality to Catholic faith, likewise nurturing people in a sacramental outlook on life.

4. *Affirmation of Creation's Innate Goodness:* Catholics hold a positive outlook on the entire created order. This allows for a trust in the inherent goodness of humanity made in God's image despite the reality of sin and its consequences, and a tenacious belief that God's graced presence in the world is never overcome by evil. Adequate catechesis, therefore, seeks to instill a sense of trust that God is ultimately and always "on our side," and gives attention to ecological issues and our responsibility for God's creation.
5. *Rationality:* Catholicism fully embraces God as the Mystery that we can never fully comprehend, and yet holds that it is possible to know something of God, and that such belief is consonant with human reason. The traditional Catholic notion that theology is "faith seeking understanding," as expressed by St. Anselm of Canterbury, articulates this insight. Following this, good catechesis encourages people to *freely* come to faith, and to embrace their Christian faith with personal conviction.
6. *Commitment to Social Justice and Peace:* Catholic social teaching provides the basis for creating and maintaining social and economic structures that support equality and resist oppression in all its forms, and which promote Gospel peace in all areas of life. Catechists should encourage active participation in works of justice and peace. They should also find ways to concretely link various areas

of curriculum with social justice practices (Eucharist with feeding the hungry, etc.), intentionally integrating faith and everyday living.

7. *Catholicity*: The very name “Catholic” (from *kata*: including, and *holos*: whole) indicates a spirit of inclusion and hospitality, where all are welcomed in the spirit of Jesus. Jesus himself modeled hospitality by ever-widening his circle of disciples, embracing sinners and tax collectors as well as friends, and breaking bread with all. Therefore, catechesis must nurture a “catholic” consciousness, one that welcomes all and reaches out to all in need.
8. *Spirituality*: Catholicism offers many rich traditions that support and uphold a life of faith. Authentic Catholic spiritual practices allow us to seek holiness in the midst of daily life without ever positioning ourselves as over and against “the world.” Such practices form a rich fiber of lived faith, while allowing inculturation of the wider universal tradition in the tangible here and now. Catechesis should introduce people to Catholic spiritual practices that nourish their faith and provide opportunities for enriching, life-giving experiences of God’s presence in daily life.

Let’s Get Real

Glancing over this list, a religious educator could feel overwhelmed. “There’s so much here, and I still only have ten weeks!” A comprehensive presentation of every aspect of Catholicism is more than one can hope to address in the time given for adult faith formation. Ideally, a scope and sequence chart will offer a catechetical schema that

allows the entire “Story of the Catholic faith” to unfold over a number of years. However, with no plan in place, the religious educator can make practical use of the depth structures with careful consideration and evaluation. Here, I suggest two ways this can happen: within survey courses that intend to offer a birds-eye view of Catholicism, or within topical courses that address one particular aspect of the faith.

First, the survey course. Of the possible themes that could be presented in a survey course, which topics reflect the depth structures of the tradition? Examine your resources and use the depth structures as a measuring rod for deciding if your program or potential materials “cover the basics.” If any of these depth structures are missing, perhaps another text or supplementary material is in order. If there is more material than can be accessed appropriately, give primary attention to those that represent the deeper, more central foundations underlying the Catholic tradition and identity.

Next, the topical course. When presenting only one aspect of the Catholic tradition, make sure that the depth structures are reflected in your presentation. In a course on sacraments, each of the depth structures should be somehow evident, even if only implicitly. Are the sacraments portrayed in a way that reflects both scripture and tradition? That promotes commitment to social justice? To spirituality? Are they presented in a welcoming, inclusive manner? And so on.

While religious education always includes and frequently emphasizes doctrinal issues, Christianity’s depth structures are not limited to these. This is a blessing for religious educators desiring to share others’ lives through their ministry. In fact, the deep structures of Catholic identity themselves serve holistically by functioning “as both the religious

context and the epistemological warrant for Catholic beliefs and practices” (Pham, 180) and can form a person’s whole self in “being Catholic.” The ultimate goal of religious education and catechesis is transformation; that is, forming the whole person in the life-giving potential of Christian tradition. Inviting people to holiness of life as disciples of Jesus is always our first priority—and the primary reason for teaching “the content.” With this holistic goal in mind, one depth structure of Catholic Christian faith is particularly useful for inviting people toward further transformation of life—spirituality.

Spirituality: A Postmodern Match

Spirituality is of special interest in light of today’s cultural postmodernity; it is also helpful for supporting an overall sense of “being Catholic.” Today, many “spiritual practices” have become popular in the wider culture, such as incense, prayer beads, candles and blessing prayers, and these often claim other traditions as their origin. Yet, many of these and similar practices have long existed within Catholic spirituality. Ritual, art, sacred space and gestures, music, the analogical imagination, architecture, devotional prayer and celebration of the liturgical seasons can be very useful to both invite people to explore their own faith and to enjoy a deeper appropriation of it.

One of the tasks of Catholic religious education is to steep people in the ethos of Catholicism, to provide an instinct for “things Catholic” which is gained not so much from “accumulation of data...but from a personal, deep and prolonged familiarity” (Pham 179) with the tradition. In this way, a Catholic worldview becomes a lifestyle, a culture that forms people’s perspectives in hidden yet powerful ways. Spiritual practices show us

how the truths of our faith provide nourishment through bodily participation. (For more on this topic, see Colleen Griffith's cited work.) They are key to Catholic identity formation, ensuring that our faith will sustain us over the long haul and providing an entryway into Catholic living for today's postmoderns.

Balancing the Presentation: A Carpenter's Level

Knowing "what to teach" is a major consideration for religious educators. Considering "how to teach it" in a balanced manner is also crucial, so that sharing faith can be life-giving rather than too burdensome to bear. Three "touchstones of faithfulness" can become a useful carpenter's level in measuring an adequate faith-sharing with others. These touchstones are questions that can be applied to content choices around three general themes: *faithfulness to the human person, faithfulness to God, faithfulness to Christian tradition*. A healthy tension attempts to keep these three accountable, each one to the other two, allowing them together to act as a level for evaluations and decisions regarding matters of faith-sharing. Having such a carpenter's level can give the educator a sense of the even-handed emphasis being placed on various aspects of Christian faith, regarding the resources being used as well as the assumptions that adults with varied backgrounds and understandings bring to adult faith formation.

For example, a presentation on the doctrine of original sin should be considered in light of its faithfulness to Christian anthropology, and shaped by a realistic yet hopeful understanding of humanity. Regarding the chosen material, the educator could ask, *Does this presentation demonstrate faithfulness to the human person as created in God's*

image? Does it refuse to see humanity as innately sinful or obsessed by the misguided need to ensure salvation? At the same time, the material should meet similar standards in the other two areas—faithfulness to God and faithfulness to Christian tradition. Is this presentation faithful to our understanding of God (tender, forgiving, faithful)? Does it reflect God’s absolute loving regard and redemptive action toward all humanity and each of us? And, Is the material faithful to the church’s understanding of this doctrine; that is, expressing the Genesis event as “figurative language used to affirm a primal event...at the beginning of the history of man [sic.]” (Catechism, n. 390) that personally affects each of us? Likewise, regarding those with whom faith is being shared, a religious educator might ask, “Knowing that all adequate communication of the Gospel must be “according to the mode of the receiver,” how might I be attentive to each person’s individual faith-journey and vision of sin, grace and redemption?

Certainly, where a person’s faith is concerned, the religious educator or pastoral minister must tread lightly, with much sensitivity and respect when presenting new ideas and perspectives. Letting go of dearly held beliefs in favor of deeper understandings can be an arduous journey of faith development, and blessed are those who can accompany others with reassurance and perseverance.

Hope for Postmodern Catechesis

In cultural postmodernity, a spiritual hunger for transcendence has moved many adults to more openly question their faith, their beliefs, their religious identity, and to yearn for “the more.” There is much potential for faith formation programs to respond to these

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hungers with the “living waters” (John 7:38) promised by Jesus. As Christians, rejection of meta-narratives sends us back to our own Christian sources, to joyfully reclaim our *own* Meta-Narrative: the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. We can rely on the tradition’s depth structures when choosing content for sharing this Gospel with adults. We can benefit from attending to the healthy tension in an ongoing dynamic between human personhood, God and the Christian tradition. And we can confidently propose Catholicism’s spirituality as a source of sustenance for the journey of today’s postmoderns. Together, these can help us to offer a generative framework for adult faith formation.

At times, truly accepting the vocation of sharing faith through religious education or pastoral ministry can challenge our personal integrity, especially if we are tempted to look for easy answers to difficult questions. Yet, to life’s deepest questions, faith responds with “certitude, not certainty,” (Pham, 183). A willingness to grapple with the difficulties will support your own belief as an educator as well as the growth of those with whom you seek to share faith. Determining questions of content as an educator won’t provide you with “all the answers” but deciding *what* to share and *how* to share it will give you a place to start the conversation...even when the “Noah questions” arise!

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