

Searching Our Souls: Religious Education and the Loss of Catholic Culture

Michael P. Horan, Ph.D.

Professor of Religious Education and Pastoral Theology
Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California

This essay reflects on challenges to Catholic religious educators and youth ministers issued by the sociological findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, the principal investigators of the national study and authors of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, conclude that the “vast majority” of teenagers in America are “*incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, religious practices, and its meaning in their lives.” (131) The authors assert that American Catholic teenagers trail their peers from all Christian churches and from other religions in their ability to identify adults whom they can call on for support in their faith questions, practices and hopes. (207-17) These findings, it can be argued, flag the breakdown of a Catholic “culture” insofar as the religious practices, meanings and values of one generation have either not been shared with, or have not been received by, another generation.

In an effort to consider the meaning and impact of *Soul Searching*, national leaders in four Catholic organizations have formed an alliance called the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis (PAC). The Partnership includes the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), and the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL) with support of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). By aligning all four professional groups to address adolescent catechesis, this partnership seeks to marshal the pastoral experience and collective wisdom of the adult community that ministers to and with youth. PAC represents the interests of thousands of ministers, lay and ordained, who daily commit to the faith formation of young people in Catholic parishes and schools in the United States.

As a first step, these partners commissioned and published a series of articles analyzing various facets and issues that impact the present state of catechesis. The series appears on the web sites of the organizations, promoting wide readership and shared reflection on the present state of youth catechesis. (A full bibliography of the web articles appears at the conclusion of this essay). The nine articles summarize not only the thinking of their authors; they represent the wider concerns of many practitioners, church leaders, parents, and interested adults, who welcome the challenges of catechizing adolescents and who strain to improve the practice. How might these Catholic religious educators isolate the themes and concerns that are proper to adolescent formation and re-imagine the aims and tasks of this ministry? The essays of these nine authors form a first step forward on a longer journey to answer this essential question. In his helpful article, one of the nine, Jeffrey Kaster reports the findings of other studies about youth, contextualizing *Soul Searching* as a contribution to a larger conversation among social scientists, researchers, theologians and pastoral leaders. His conclusion is apt: We need more research and more reasoned reflection on the practices we now undertake in service to youth.

As a contribution to the next step and in response to the web-posted essays, I isolate and underscore three foundational insights culled from the nine essays that may be helpful as the national effort to renew adolescent catechesis continues and develops. Following the insights, I address questions to practitioners and theorists, pastoral leaders and parents, in order to promote collaboration between and among them.

Foundational Insights and Unaddressed Questions

1. Catechesis is deeper, richer, wider, and more complex than instruction in “things to know” about faith.

Several authors make clear -- and at times, go to great pains to shore up the argument -- that catechesis aims at discipleship, convincing us that a disciple is one who enjoys an intimate relationship with God in Christ. (Hagarty, Mulhall, Henderson) This resounding theme, contained subtly or overtly in virtually all the articles in the series and in every official ecclesial document on the subject, is also central to the message of the *National Directory for Catechesis (NDC)*.

Relational knowing includes both knowing the background and facts that comprise the person’s history, as well as the subtleties of spirit and personality that make this person unique in the entire world. Catechesis aims at both these kinds of knowledge, as these authors note. While catechesis aims ultimately at a relationship, that relationship is hollow without knowledge of the background and context that shape the person’s history. Knowing Christ, then, is to be steeped in two aspects of knowing. (Theisen, Hagarty)

The authors of these essays understand and esteem what speakers of the Spanish language might summarize as the distinction and inherent tension between *saber* and *conocer*. These two verbs in the Spanish language translate in English as “to know.” The first, *saber*, is the verb used to indicate that one knows facts. A disciple can make the claims: “I know the stories in the gospels, and the messages contained in the letters of the New Testament; I know the words of the Eucharistic prayer and can participate in the responses; I know the tradition of moral theology and moral reasoning that will help me to arrive at good decisions.” All these require a knowledge that is cognitive, in Spanish, *saber*. But, according to the authors a disciple can also make these claims: “I know Christ as the son of God and encounter this reality in prayer, I know that God is love poured out in Trinity, saving the world; I know the Holy Spirit as the ground and motivation of a meaningful life.” These senses of knowing result from personal encounter, and in Spanish that word for knowing is *conocer*. (Henning, Theisen)

As a modest proposal for renewed practice, theorists and practitioners need to consider, in light of the two dimensions of “knowing” Christian faith, the following questions:

- Why would these authors go to such lengths to communicate the two dimensions of knowledge inherent in catechesis? Is this not clear and obvious in the minds of the practitioners and leaders who commit

themselves to catechesis? The implicit message is that it is not clear, or it is not accepted. The history of Catholic catechesis – adolescent or any other kind – is fraught with the tension between the two dimensions of knowing and the theological “camps” that can be formed by privileging one kind of knowing over another. As pastoral leaders and ministers develop and renew catechetical efforts, the tension between these two dimensions of knowledge –cognitive and relational -- will not disappear.

- Can the tension be acknowledged rather than “resolved” in a way that moves the practice forward?
- Can practitioners and theorists work together to honestly acknowledge and thereby illumine the tension without seeking to resolve it?

2. Mature Christian faith, practiced in a healthy community, is never forced or centripetal; it is joyful and uncomfortable.

Various authors among the nine concur that the gospel calls disciples to live a free and active life that points to the reign of God and serves the world that God loves. (See especially Henderson, Henning) Living as a disciple leads inevitably to both joy and discomfort. Consequently, catechesis is a sham if it does not carry forward a gospel message that makes us simultaneously at home and uncomfortable. The authors persuade us that catechesis makes us at home and even joyful because the community, the *ekklesia*, that forms us (and to which we, in turn, contribute) is based in the values of the Christ proclaimed in Word and sacrament. But this cuts both ways. The authors of the essays send a subtle and consistent message about invitation and joy, often observed when a community worships. Where Word and worship are vibrant, community life and formation of disciples thrive. Where Word and worship lack vitality, community life languishes, making it easy to imagine why adolescents (or anyone) flee the parish scene in search of something authentic. (Warren) Joy is different from and richer than simply feeling good, but formation that does not introduce adolescents to a joyful community will not convince them in the short run, or sustain them in the long haul, to perceive or pursue the deeper gospel injunction to take up the cross.

A corollary to joyful community and worship are uncomfortable questions and practices that make disciples much more than club members. Ironically, formation that aims only to welcome and nourish, acting like a centripetal force, will not compel teens to encounter the gospel at its core.(Warren) The discomfort that comes with taking up the cross both attracts and challenges disciples to share with the world a joy that defies surface comfort and transcends church walls. How else will disciples serve the world that God loves and make Christ known in the world? (Warren, Henderson, Henning) Catechesis aims at behavioral change as well as cognitive and affective conversion. But behaviors are not only a desired effect; practices furnish the conditions for encounter, because people learn the gospel by practicing it. (Lee, Henning, Hagarty) Service and justice education function as the way to encounter, as well as share, the truth of Jesus’ message. Uncomfortable questions and gospel practices of humble service, hard witness,

and acts on behalf of social justice should shake up comfortable lives, consumerist assumptions, and sedentary mindsets. (Warren, Dinges, Lee)

Additionally, catechesis involves a *free decision*; this feature of catechesis is particularly interesting and challenging to those who minister to and with youth. (Warren) Therefore ministers who seek to form a new generation of disciples will need to work in concert with developmental psychologists and educational theorists to pursue the following question:

- “How does a genuine invitation read like an invitation and not a summons?” Honesty demands that all the adults acknowledge the tricky and sometimes clumsy ways in which adolescents need to be invited without feeling forced. To coerce within a culture of choice (Dinges) is to lose them before they can even consider the merits of becoming a disciple.
- What practices actually promote an invitation to experience Christian joy *and* the heart of the gospel message of the cross?
- Are parents and other adults willing to share their faith through service and works of justice, so as to form the next generation, even to the point of their discomfort?

3. Ours is not our ancestors’ world or culture. The tasks proper to adolescent formation occur on an internet-linked planet and in a nation informed by a post modern approach to religion and culture.

The authors of these essays know that something is amiss with the current state of youth catechesis, but they do not give into the temptation to bash and blame postmodern culture so much as to describe and more fully understand it.

William Dinges rightly draws our attention to the religious “temper” of American culture and the features of postmodern life that pervade the consciousness of the nation and its teenagers. Knowing that individualism and a culture of choice complicate young lives, Dinges shines a light on the tendency to make religion one more “signature” item that individual shoppers choose like cars or clothes. Dinges ends his essay, not by condemning the culture of our own making, but by exhorting practitioners and leaders to promote a positively constructed Catholic identity as distinct from – not better than – a Protestant or generically “Christian” identity. His exhortation seems particularly important and often lost in conversations about Catholic identity among pastoral ministers. If Dinges is right about the pervasive individualism in American culture and its injection of “choice” to be involved in religion, then the task of how to promote a Catholic identity may prove to be both tricky and potentially renewing for Catholics of all ages, including the young.

It will likely be tricky because an identity borne from standing in the center and not in the *margins* of society will be hard to carry off. Catholics have not been skilled in doing this. The first wave of western European immigrants who came to the eastern shores of the United States from 1840 to 1920 built the church buildings that became parishes and

forged the Catholic school system that sealed an identity for several generations of Catholics. They did so in an America that was at times unwelcoming to these new immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, and Poland, to name a few countries. The lack of welcome accorded these immigrant Catholics was not due solely to their religion, but their religion contributed to and compounded the prejudice they experienced. And it sealed their identity as different from the dominant economic and religious culture at that time.

By contrast, today's second and third waves of Latino and Asian Catholic immigrants meet with considerably less prejudice based on their Catholicism *per se*. Many Catholics of the first wave (and some of the second and third waves) can be blamed or praised for having amassed wealth and grasped the "American Dream" by the throat. A Catholic identity *over against* others, forged as a reaction to overt or subtle forms of anti-Catholicism, is harder to imagine today than in earlier times. If many Catholics today are integrated in American social, political and economic institutions, non-Catholics also participate in and benefit from the services of Catholic institutions. For example, the Catholic school system today serves non-Catholic as well as Catholic students and does so out of a deep commitment to a mission that has shifted its weight from Catholic identity "over against" Protestant Christians (and Protestant prayers in public schools). Catholic schools open their doors today to non-Catholics out of a renewed sense of mission to those who are in need of an education. Non-Catholic students and their families find riches in the school's desire to embody Jesus' message, to inculcate a sense of community, and to commit to serve those in need. (Henderson, Henning)

Attempts at constructing a positive Catholic identity at this time in Catholic history may also carry potential for genuine renewal for teens and all Catholics, because these attempts begin with a distinct advantage. Ours is not our ancestors' world or culture, but it is not our ancestors' church either. Committed Catholics who seek to articulate a Catholic identity today will do so from a stronger point of departure because committed Catholic adults have grown in their *Christian* identity. Success stories about catechetical practices in the past forty years inevitably showcase the Catechumenate in its renewed form, and they narrate a conscious commitment to ground people in the Word of God. (Mulhall, Henning, Warren) In addition to the Catechumenate, small faith sharing groups, bible study circles, and Advent and Lenten seasonal series in churches across the land attest to Catholic adults' interest in scripture as the basis for an integrated adult spirituality. Even the "discipleship" language employed by the authors (who quote or paraphrase official church documents as they use it) derives from a Christian self-understanding not readily overheard in Catholic speech or found in printed word before Vatican Council II (1962-65).

Three factors may give youth, and the adults who seek to form them, an advantage in this positive construction project. First, Catholic teens today know none or little of the history of Catholics in America. Second, they inhabit a multi-religious United States where postmodern sensibilities are intolerant of intolerance. Third, Michael Lee's article notes that specific cultures and the family-based practices within them function like unearthed and long-unread texts that catechetical leaders need to read and study. These

three factors may furnish a distinct advantage in forging a positively constructed Catholic identity that avoids defensive stances and adversarial self-descriptions, and incorporates newly articulated understandings of identity through faith practices within family life.

Pastoral leaders in parishes, dioceses and schools will need to collaborate with academics, catechists and parents in attempting to construct, articulate and reflect upon Catholic identity. The following questions ought to find a voice and a hearing among them:

- Are Catholic adults willing to undertake this project in concert with their non-Catholic spouses, friends and colleagues? What will be the anticipated benefits to a process that brings them together to do this?
- Will bishops, academics, and pastoral leaders, respect the input of lay Catholics whose language, imagination and experience are, depending on one's perspective, either encumbered or freed by less formal theological education than the leaders?
- What sets of experiences can pastoral leaders provide to promote genuine conversation among family members of various generations about those practices that help to reveal God to them? Spurred on by the postmodern perspective of teenagers, Catholic adults may be challenged to get clear and articulate about distinctiveness within ecumenism, positively (and not defensively) forming a Catholic identity in a larger Christian matrix.

Conclusion

Constructing a theologically reasoned and pastorally effective response to the challenges set forth in *Soul Searching* will require the efforts of theorists and practitioners of Religious Education, parents and families, adults and catechetical volunteers. They will need to practice humility and to cultivate, rather than compete with, one another in naming any next steps to support the faith of the young.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dinges, William D. "The American Cultural Context for Adolescent Catechesis." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry.
<<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/Dingesarticle.pdf>>.

Hagarty, Maura Thompson. "What the Church Has Been Telling Us about Adolescent Catechesis." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. Accessed 25 September 2007.
<<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/Hagartyarticle.pdf>>.

Henderson, Paul. "The State of Adolescent Catechesis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. <<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/MonographTwoOctober2005.pdf>>.

Henning, Laura. "Forming Disciples of Jesus in Parish and School." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. <<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/HenningArticle.pdf>>.

Kaster, Jeffrey. "The State of Adolescent Catechesis Today: A Review of the Literature." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. <<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/Kasterarticle.pdf>>.

Mulhall, Daniel S. "Adolescent Catechesis and the National Directory for Catechesis: It's About Discipleship." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. <<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/MonographOneSeptember2005.pdf>>.

Smith, Christian, with Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Theisen, Michael. "Adolescent Catechesis Today: On the Road to Transformation." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. <<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/Theisenarticle.pdf>>.

Warren, Michael. "Reflections on Parish and Adolescent Catechesis." The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. <<http://www.nfcym.org/resources/components/adocatechesis/documents/WarrenFinal.pdf>>.