

# Youth Learning and Living the Faith: Hopes and Challenges for Adolescent Catechesis

By Tom East

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How can we promote dynamic faith learning among adolescents? One principle we need to consider is that youth are looking for a faith that works: a faith they can put into practice in their everyday lives and situations; a faith that makes a difference in their life and the life of the world. Two Chinese characters represent the word “learning.” The first character means to *study*. It is composed of two parts: a symbol that means “to accumulate knowledge,” above a symbol for a child in a doorway. The second character means to *practice constantly*, and it shows a bird developing the ability to leave the nest. The upper symbol represents flying; the lower symbol, youth. Young people today are standing in a doorway, preparing to enter the world of adult faith. Our hope for youth today is that they will practice their faith constantly and be ready to soar as growing young disciples.

Over the last three years, the Center for Ministry Development has been working with Saint Mary’s Press in collaboration with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry to study *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*. This essay examines the findings that emerge from the group interviews with youth, adult leaders, and parish staff members. Among the findings from this qualitative research study were significant insights into the nature of adolescent catechesis and faith formation. In this study, young people told us that it is important that their faith be something they can put into practice and learn how to apply.

## Faith Formation Finding #1

Faith formation with adolescents most often begins with real life issues and connects faith to life.

*“...youth ministry is like a bridge to connect the lakes of the real world, and church and God.”*  
Youth Participant

*“That’s the point of our youth ministry...we can take this faith and these lessons that we’re supposed to learn and these things we’re supposed to believe in and say, but how do these go into our lives?”* Youth Participant

To put this finding into practice, we must be in touch with the issues that young people face. Jesus walked with the people he was striving to teach. He knew their hungers. He taught the kingdom in a way that spoke to their hearts and addressed their immediate concerns. To present youth a living faith, we must help them do theological reflection. What is happening in their lives? What is happening in our world? How does our faith speak to these situations? What are we called to do as people of faith in response?

Connecting faith to life means that sometimes we allow the starting point for catechesis to be the question and concern on the minds and hearts of the young people. We start with their lives. Other times, we present a teaching of the faith in the context of their lives by starting with their life experience and connecting faith teachings to these experiences. There should always be an answer to the question, “so what?” In preparing lessons and teaching opportunities, we should always address this question: will youth know how they can live their life differently if they adopt this lesson of the faith?

The second finding related to faith formation has to do with the relationship between adolescent catechesis and the overall youth ministry. This relationship is often misunderstood. Sometimes, youth ministry has been associated with the “fun” and experiential aspects of youth involvement. In parishes with effective youth ministry, catechesis has a central role.

## **Faith Formation Finding #2**

Faith formation is at the heart of youth ministry.

*“The key there is that we allow them to experience the message. It’s not boring, you know, they come in and they experience the message. We don’t just open the book and read it to them. But we give it to them. They live the message, somehow or another, through what we do. And I think that’s been really key to bringing the young people in.”*  
Adult Leader in Youth Ministry

In effective parishes, staff members described faith formation as being the core of youth ministry. They noted that giving priority to faith learning was important to youth and parents. Furthermore, this priority helped youth ministry gain support and credibility.

This finding should spur evaluation and assessment of youth ministry: how central is catechesis within our programs and strategies? One of the primary motivations for youth participation and parental support is faith learning. Sometimes we shortchange youth because we think they do enough learning in school. Because of this we try to give them a break and have youth ministry become a place to relax and just “be.” Youth ministry should be a safe, comfortable environment where youth can be with peers and adults who care about them. However, learning isn’t a dirty word, and when it is done effectively, it isn’t boring or tedious. As youth ministry leaders, we need to challenge ourselves to be creative and innovative. We need to take the time to form ourselves in the faith and in dynamic methods for sharing faith. Teaching was a central part of Jesus’ ministry. It should be just as central in the Christ we make present to youth through our parish youth ministry.

*“The challenge of discipleship – of following Jesus – is at the heart of the Church’s mission. All ministry with adolescents must be directed toward presenting young people with the good News of Jesus Christ and inviting and challenging them to become his disciples. For this reason, catechesis is an essential component of youth ministry and one that needs renewed emphasis.”* (emphasis added)

United States Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Vision*,  
(Washington DC: United States Conference  
of Catholic Bishops, 1997, p. 10)

To put faith formation at the heart of youth ministry we need some clarity about terms and methods. In this research project, we chose to use the inclusive term faith formation to describe the intentional and occasional efforts to teach and form youth in the faith. These efforts include aspects of evangelization and catechesis. The model for formation is the Emmaus story. Jesus accompanied the disciples as they were talking about what was happening. He related all of their questions to the Scriptures and helped them to see current events in light of faith. In this midst of their learning, he revealed himself in the breaking of the bread. Pope John Paul II calls us to walk with youth in this way:

*“As Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus, so the Church must become today the traveling companion of young people...”*

Pope John Paul II, World Youth Day 1995, in *Renewing the Vision*,  
(Washington DC: United States Conference  
of Catholic Bishops, 1997, p. 2)

Faith formation includes the informal “teachable” moments that happen in the midst of all aspects of youth ministry.

*"Questions just kept coming up. It really got you thinking and it was done all by ourselves so I think that helps to give us time to do things on our own."*

*Youth Participant*

*"...that group of boys I was talking about earlier, there's no way I can set these boys down and do a religious education class with them. Do you know how much catechesis we've done playing basketball?"*

*Adult Leader*

To be ready for these teachable moments, adult leaders need to be skilled in drawing out the questions of youth and being able to articulate the faith in life situations. This style of catechesis traditionally has been a strength of Catholic youth ministry.

At the same time that we recognize the power of the informal catechesis, we still need to provide faith formation for youth in a way that is intentional and systematic. We need to ask ourselves the question: over the seven years of youth ministry, how will we present the teachings of the faith to young people in all of its fullness? We provide these teachings not to overwhelm young people and not because we need to "get it all into their heads before they are out of our control." We provide youth with the treasures of our faith because these teachings help them live their lives more fully and because these teachings guide their growth as young disciples. We provide these teachings in a way that recognizes that faith learning is lifelong; it builds on everything they learned as children and it prepares them to be hungry to continue learning as adults. We avoid the "data-dump" where we overload youth with information and think we are teaching just because we are verbally presenting the precepts of faith. Teaching is more than talking or reading. It is a dynamic relationship and encounter between the learner and the material. This encounter is facilitated by a teacher. Faith learning that is planned and intentional creates an environment where youth and their families count on the parish to be a place for learning the faith in a way that matters.

In the research study, we found that effective parishes provided for multi-dimensional youth ministry which created lots of opportunities for teachable moments. They also had a plan for how they would provide systematic catechesis. Three main methods emerged.

### ***1. Intentional Faith Formation Infused throughout Youth Ministry and Parish Life Involvement***

In these parishes, the faith themes needed by adolescents were communicated throughout the programs and strategies of youth ministry. Some themes were addressed during the weekly youth community gathering. Others were

addressed within faith sharing series or retreats. Other aspects were built into experiences: youth preparing for a summer service trip, experienced formation in the Catholic social teachings as part of their preparation. Youth who were becoming involved liturgical ministries experienced sacramental formation as part of the practical preparation. The faith formation in these parishes was planned and intentional though it was woven throughout the variety of gatherings and involvements.

## **2. *Intentional Faith Formation as part of the Whole Parish Community in an Intergenerational Model***

In these parishes, people of all ages were participating in faith learning as an intergenerational community. The life of the parish became the starting point as the community gathered to prepare for events of church life and learned the faith in the process. Often times, these learning events began with the whole community gathered and included time when age groups were divided for teaching and faith exploration among peers. In parishes that were employing the intergenerational model as their primary faith formation effort, youth ministries could count on the community to provide the intentional catechesis. Other aspects of catechesis needed in particular ways by young people were addressed through other aspects of youth ministry.

## **3. *Intentional Faith Formation as a distinct element of Youth Ministry***

In these parishes, the faith formation was a distinct element within youth ministry. Religious education classes and sacramental preparation programs were offered to youth on a regular basis. The youth who participated in these programs were encouraged to participate in other aspects of youth ministry. Some of the methods used for these elements include:

- Weekly classes that are graded level
- Sacramental preparation programs for Confirmation
- Week-long religious education programs offered in the summer
- Faith sharing series
- Home based faith sharing programs for youth and their families

Whatever the method, effective parishes strived to provide faith formation in a way that was planned, intentional, and collaborative. They also strived to provide faith learning that was dynamic and hands-on. Youth, adult leaders, and parish staff were unanimous in describing faith formation with youth as having distinctive qualities.

### Faith Formation Finding #3

To be effective and engaging with youth, faith formation has these qualities:

- Facilitated by open-minded, authentic, faith-filled adults
- Engages youth's energies
- Includes community building
- Includes peer sharing, witness, and leadership
- Teaches about Catholic identity
- Seizes teachable moments
- Is experiential, active and innovative
- Doesn't feel like school—doesn't lecture or have too much focus on text books

Parish staff members commented that faith formation with adolescents happens in a way that is different than formation with children or adults. They saw formation as inclusive of many aspects of youth ministry.

*"I say teaching instead of catechesis because that includes the many community-building events and all of those other things. The quality of the education I think is really top notch. I think that is the key to having a successful youth ministry as oppose to just youth community building."*

*Parish Staff Member*

*"Our numbers are up, and I think it's a better education style, as opposed to somebody coming in, reading out of a book...and more centered on what's really relevant to this day and age."*

*Parish Staff Member*

In the interviews with youth, they told us that the most important factor in faith learning was the person who was sharing faith. Youth learn faith when they are engaged with people of vibrant faith. They are looking for adults who are passionate about living the faith and are open and respectful to young people.

*"I am just saying that there's a large part of the time when the adults are older and wiser than we are and they have the benefit of the years of going through the same questions that we did. But I think what is so important is that we go through the questioning and we talk it out without being immediately told we're wrong..."*

*Youth Participant*

Adult leaders in youth ministry emphasized the need for creative and dynamic learning. They told us that it is important that faith learning doesn't look or feel like school. After all, youth are full-time students; that is their "day job." They don't want to moonlight by experiencing more of their job at night or on the weekends. They are hungry to learn, but it has to happen differently.

*“What doesn’t work? Textbooks, workbooks. They don’t want to go to school again for another hour.”*  
Adult Leader

To implement this finding, we begin by attracting adults of vibrant faith to work with us in providing adolescent catechesis. We also involve youth in the planning and in providing witness to faith. We form our youth and adults in the faith so that they can share the faith with confidence. We immerse ourselves in the issues and concerns of youth today so that when we share faith, we can speak in a language they understand. We use dynamic resources and teaching methods so that youth can experience the faith and integrate teachings into their lives.

## **Implications**

These findings have many implications for us as leaders in youth ministry.

- **We need to be People of Vibrant Faith as We Share Faith with Youth**

Youth today are looking for vibrancy. Give them extreme sports, eye-popping graphics, mouth-watering tastes. They are looking for this same vibrancy in the people they encounter. As Sharon Reed stated, youth want to know where we stand so they can choose to stand with us. They are looking for people who believe and live the faith in a way that is bold and evident. That doesn’t mean that we need to be in dramatic circumstances to share faith with youth, but it does mean that our faith should show; we shouldn’t be afraid to show our passion and belief in the way that we teach youth. To be vibrant in our faith means that we are constantly learning and growing. We have to draw from wells that are full so that youth can experience the living water. We should be involved in faith formation programs and in communities of prayer and service that call us to faith action. We should also strive to find and invite people of vibrant faith in our community to share with youth.

In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer Parker contends that whatever subject we are teaching, what we are really communicating is our humanity. If this is true about history, math, and science, this is even more central to our teaching about the faith.

- **We need to Provide for Faith Learning that is Dynamic, Interactive, and Hands-On**

For the past three years, the Center for Ministry Development has been working with parishes to develop intergenerational faith learning through a grant funded

project entitled, “Generations of Faith.” This project is led by John Roberto, Mariette Martineau, and Leif Kehrwald.

One of the resources developed in this project is a list of principles for dynamic faith learning:

### **Characteristics of an Effective Learning Experience**

Here are several important characteristics of effective learning experiences. Use these in selecting and designing learning experiences, as well as evaluating the quality of the learning program.

People of all ages and generations learn best when the learning program . . .

- engages them **experientially** – head, heart, and lifestyles – in the learning activity, providing them with direct, first-hand experiences.
- respects and incorporates their **experience** in the learning activity.
- provides an **environment** that is characterized by warmth, trust, acceptance, and inquiry.
- incorporates a variety of **multi-sensory** methods to engage the whole person, such as art, drama, music, dance, storytelling, media, prayer, rituals.
- incorporates methods that reflect the **multiple intelligences** of learners – verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, and existential.
- incorporates methods that respect the **learning styles** of learners – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.
- utilizes **collaborative** and **group-centered** formats for study, inquiry, activities, and sharing.
- engages them in **construction, discovery, and exploration** of the topic or concept.
- is **participative** and **interactive**, actively engaging them in the learning process.
- engages them in **real-world learning** and **application**, making the connection between learning and life, and faith and life.
- utilizes a variety of visual **media** and **online** resources to enhance the learning

(Generations of Faith website: [generationsoffaith.org](http://generationsoffaith.org))

These characteristics describe a number of interrelated factors that come together to help an individual and a community learn the faith. Learning is so much more than just hearing information. For information to take hold in our identity,

it must touch more than our minds; it must attend to our heart and our lived experience.

In *Renewing the Vision*, this type of holistic catechesis is described: “Genuine faith is a total response of the whole person – mind, heart, and will. The ministry of Catechesis fosters growth in Catholic faith in all three dimensions – trusting (heart), knowing and believing (mind), and doing (will).”

*Renewing the Vision*, (p. 29).

In my own life, I experienced learning about empathy in a way that touched my mind, heart, and identity. From the formation I experienced as a young adult, I knew that our Catholic social teachings called us to be mindful of the roots of injustice and to make a connection between our choices and the situation of people who exist in unjust conditions. I knew that people who grew and harvested coffee often lived in poverty, though this seemed absurd when I would purchase a latte or mocha for \$4.

When I traveled to Haiti as part of a mission learning trip, I visited a family who owned three coffee trees. These trees were not their livelihood – they were share croppers who worked in other people’s fields everyday for a small share of the food they raised. In front of their simple home, they planted three coffee trees to help them raise additional money. They offered for me to taste one of the coffee berries off the tree which was the size of a large citrus tree. The berry tasted like a raw cranberry. I could see the bright red berries that covered the tree. I asked them how much coffee this tree produced. I was told that the berries only come once a year and that by the time they are hand-picked, dried, and brought to the roaster, the tree produces about one pound of coffee. They are paid 80 cents to 1 dollar for the pound. They had three trees. This was their plan to better themselves. After tasting the berry – and more importantly, meeting the family, I have never experienced coffee in the same way. Their faces tug at my heart and influence my choices when I make purchases and when I choose how to tithe from our family’s resources.

We need to provide multi-sensory experiences so that youth can taste and see the fullness of our faith. We need to bring youth into communion with people who are living the faith and with those that are calling us to live in a more just and equitable way. We need to help youth to have a hands-on experience of living a faith that matters; to their everyday lives and to the life of the world.

- **We need to Use the Life of the Parish to Teach the Faith to Young People**

As a community of faith, our actions and practices teach the children, youth, and adults among us every time we are together. Effective faith formation calls upon

all aspects of parish life. In the *General Directory of Catechesis*, this vision of parish life is described:

*“Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, and communicates it in many ways.”*  
GDC #105

*“As the vitality of the human body depends on the proper function of all its organs, so also the maturation of the Christian life requires that it be cultivated in all its dimensions: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit. When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development.”*  
GDC #87

In her book, *Fashion Me a People*, Maria Harris describes our life as Church as the curriculum for religious formation. She emphasizes that we need to distinguish between the curriculum of education and the curriculum of schooling. We are about the curriculum of education. The root of education is from the Latin *educare*, which means to draw out. Learners will draw out and make conclusions about the faith from participation in the life of the community. Harris suggests that our task is to mobilize our creative educative powers in such a way as to fashion a people of God through the practices of the community. This is a very different idea of curriculum from one that relies upon textbooks as the starting point.

The life of the parish presents tremendous opportunities for faith learning. The occasion of a baptism in the community presents us with the chance to teach youth the meaning of our baptismal vocation. The experience of the Church year provides numerous opportunities to help youth learn the meaning of our life of faith. The events of our community life, such as the celebration of our pastor’s anniversary of ordination, represent a time to reflect upon who we are as a community of faith.

To use the life of the parish, we consider all of the potential connections we can make as part of our youth ministry efforts. This includes ways that we align our youth ministry content with what is happening the liturgical year. It also includes ways that we use ministry, service and leadership opportunities within the parish as a chance to provide catechesis in preparation for involvement.

*“Part of the vision of youth ministry is to present to youth the richness of the person of Christ, which perhaps exceeds the ability of one person to capture, but which might be effected by the collective ministry of the many persons who make up the Church.”*

*A Vision of Youth Ministry*, Department of Education (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976, p. 24)

- **We should Collaborate in our Faith Formation Efforts with Youth**

In our research, youth told us that they experience the various parts of youth ministry as being without boundaries; they don't know which leader in the parish is leading what because the leaders are working together collaboratively. The adults described this as having boundaries between ministries that are "permeable" instead of boundaries that are walls.

To experience the fullness of faith, youth ministry needs to work closely with leaders and staff in the areas of religious education, liturgy, service, and community life. Of special importance is collaboration with religious education leaders. Most Coordinators or Directors of Religious Education are responsible for faith formation from children through adults of all ages. This means that there is an intersection between the responsibilities of Religious Education leaders and Youth Ministry leaders, who are generally responsible for all components of youth ministry, including catechesis. This intersection should be a dialogue, a conversation, a convergence of resources and gifts, not a debate or a battleground. If we are to serve youth well, we need to find ways to work together and rely upon each other in providing for dynamic faith learning.

- **We need to Know and use Resources that will Enrich our Faith Learning Experiences**

Leaders who are effective in creating dynamic faith learning know where to find the resources they need to put it all together. The teachings of the faith as provided in our Church documents are essential resources to those of us who share faith with youth. The *General Directory for Catechesis* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are resources that we should know how to use as we prepare learning experiences and teachings. People are among the most important resources. People in your parish and people in other communities who are involved in youth faith formation can help share experiences and ideas that work. We should have access to the books, media, and web resources we need to be effective. One of the advantages of having and using resources is that often great attention has been paid to make sure that the presentation of the faith is clear and complete. Many diocesan offices have a wealth of resources to preview and recommend

- **As Youth Ministry Leaders, We need to Reclaim the Charism of Teaching**

Youth ministry prides itself on having good processes – we facilitate fun and engaging activities that get youth involved. Sometimes we have been happy to "let the process speak for itself." In this principle, I am referring to the part of teaching that includes giving an oral presentation of material in a planned and organized way. In the midst of a justice learning activity, the leader was

supposed to facilitate a discussion on what had been experienced and what was learned. He had planned to provide a summary of the faith connections from the experience. Instead, he was so caught up in the youth's participation, that at the end of the activity, he announced "I think your participation in this activity speaks for itself." Then he concluded the evening. I think this was a missed opportunity. We are often afraid that if we teach we will be like the boring teachers that youth dislike and turn-off. If we don't find ways to risk and take the opportunity to teach our youth, they will miss the connections and learning that we could facilitate. Many of our youth do not experience faith formation in any other setting than in youth ministry. If we don't teach our youth, they will be taught the truths of life by media and marketers who are forming our youth to be good consumers.

I think that youth ministry leaders should learn how to teach in at least these three timeframes and settings. First, we need to be comfortable with the teachable moment. A young person asks us if we really believe it is important to go to Church on Sunday. We should be ready to answer this question from a stance of our personal integration of the church teachings. The second timeframe is a five minute inspirational. In the midst of a prayer, at the end of a service activity, as we are getting on the bus, as a wake-up or goodnight during a retreat, we should be able to speak about one clear idea concerning our faith in a short teaching. The third setting would be a more formal teaching presentation that is part of a larger learning experience. We should learn how to organize and present teachings about the faith in an oral presentation that could last 15 to 20 minutes, which is probably the longest period of time that youth can listen before we need to switch gears and move to another form of learning.

## **Conclusion**

People in our Church are concerned about youth learning the faith. The bishops of the United States have identified adolescent catechesis as an area of concern and priority. Leaders in our parishes often voice concern and fear about youth losing the faith. Parents often express their expectations that youth ministry provide ways for youth to learn the faith. In their own way, youth ask us to share a faith that is real and that matters. As leaders in youth ministry, we answered the call so that we could walk with youth in their faith journey. Sharing faith is integral to this journey. The journey itself is all about becoming closer to the person of Jesus the Christ who calls us to conversion and to boldness in living the faith. We should work together in this task; we should have many strategies; we should begin again, often so that we can continually strive for faith learning that is active, dynamic and practical for today's youth.

*"The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ."* GDC # 80

***Note Regarding the Research Project:***

*Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes* is a project of the Center for Ministry Development and Saint Mary's Press, in collaboration with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. The findings from the project are provided in the book, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, which is published by Saint Mary's Press in Winona, Minnesota (2004). The reports and information from this project are available to download at the following address: **[www.cmdnet.org/symposium](http://www.cmdnet.org/symposium)**.

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