

# A Look at High School Religious Education

By JOAN BENSON

Certain mind wracking questions are continuously present in these days of wrap-around communication and instant experts. We're forever hearing: "I don't understand what young people want," "What is this do-your-own-thing?" "Kids just have no values today."

Like most Twentieth Century problems there is no ONE answer, no ONE practical and containable solution to these groupings nor to the underlying fears

and lack of communication indicated in such feelings. In fact, not only are "solutions" to the problems multi-faceted — so are the questions themselves! Teachers of religion are among the first to know this.

High school programs of religious education today engaged as they are in the teaching and healing missions of the church often approach their educative process in three phases; first, by examining the needs of youth; second, by setting up viable goals vis-a-vis the previously

considered needs of teenagers; and third, by working out approaches (in the light of their goals) to meet such needs.

## NEEDS OF YOUTH

In considering the contemporary concerns of teenagers, today, parish programs should consider the idealism of the young person; his trying to understand who he is and what he is about; his working through the boy-girl relationship; his questions regarding faith; his self assertiveness (and what adult working with the high school student has not discovered the young person as lawyer!); and his action oriented nature.

## GOALS OF LOCAL PROGRAMS

Each school of religion or parish program should set up its own goals and priorities. A key factor in this phase (as well as in the others) lies with the adults of the parish. For any program to be in any way successful it is necessary to foster within the local community a climate of understanding and acceptance of teens themselves and of what the parish program intends to do.

## MEETING NEEDS

Operating on the principle that involvement begets commitment, programs of religion are utilizing methods structured to encompass the total person and especially those areas of human development dealing with feelings, attitudes, values and relationships.

Procedures which various parishes have found to be useful and effective include focusing on the developing of a sense of community. Such programs may utilize the many forms of week-ends of Christian living such as SEARCH, ENCOUNTER and related followup programs; issue oriented workshops on hunger and racism may be offered; strategies for involvement in parish councils may be devised and implemented; the development of youth liturgies may be encouraged; an understanding of the interaction of people whenever they gather together may be explored.

All of the above seek to engender in the young person a sense of responsibility for one's growth and behavior; an openness to the experience of God in everyday living; and an un-

derstanding of the church as a way of relating to the world.

Other procedures which parishes have found helpful include workshops on values; outdoor religious education programs through camping; small discussion group classes in homes; meetings around themes such as awareness, loneliness, patriotism; and the replacement of weekly meetings by one monthly meeting during which the teens and adults have a chance to spend an afternoon and evening recreating, eating, sharing, discussing, working, dancing and worshipping together.

Perhaps the variety offered today in religious education programs will encourage you to become involved in your own parish. Your teens' catechists reflect in their lives Christ the man for others.

By involving themselves in the concerns of youth, by helping their developing as human beings and concerned Christians, adults can dispel the disillusionment of young people with their elders and with a society which older people have left them.

## KNOW YOUR FAITH

### Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

**Q.** My parish has experienced a rather upsetting change of priests. Previously our pastor and assistant were both ardent proponents of Vatican II and its entire view of Christianity. Their replacements are both conservative and vocally opposed to almost all change.

How do we progress so far in the understanding of the externals of our religion and then be expected to retrace all of our steps? What is the catechist supposed to do? Before you misunderstand the situation, you should know that the pastor has no communication with the people. He refuses to discuss anything with anyone who seems the least bit progressive.

Some have "solved" the problem by going to other parishes. If there is a way to fight for these changes and stay within the parish community, this would be preferred. What can you suggest?

**A.** The situation is not uncommon today. Indeed, it frequently happens in reverse, when an insensitive progressive team replaces a long-established conservative administration. Undoubtedly, many readers have experienced both kinds of situations. Neither of them is very pleasant, and they are almost never pastorally productive.

The new pastor will have to be prepared to consult with his parish community before making changes which might seriously upset a significant portion of the people. As the Second Vatican Council reminded us, pastors "were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church toward the world. On the contrary, they (must) understand that it is their noble duty so to shepherd the faithful and recognize their services and charismatic gifts in this common undertaking with one heart" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 30).

If, as you say, the pastor refuses to enter into dialogue about his apparent rollback policy, you still have several remaining options: (1) Bring the whole matter before the Parish Council. (2) Seek advice and direction from the diocesan director of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. (3) Call the matter to the attention of the Priests' Senate, in order to keep this group closely informed of various problems within the diocese. (4) Register a formal complaint with the bishop and/or personnel board of the diocese.

**Q.** I always believed in the power of prayer. I prayed for my kids not to get sick, and when they got sick, I prayed that they would get well. I prayed that my kids would be good and happy—they are good, but this doesn't necessarily mean happy. I could go on and on with "I prayed for," but that would take too much space.

In my prayers there is always a "Thank You" and "Your will be done." My question is this: since God knows all—how we will fare in this life, what we will do, and how and when we will die, and where we will end up—do our prayers of petition really mean anything? Will my requests really change the course of events?

**A.** Neither private prayer in general nor prayers of petition in particular have been rendered obsolete by the Second Vatican Council nor by the theology developed since the time of the council.

"The spiritual life," the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states, "is not confined to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is assuredly called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father in secret (cf. Mt. 6:6); indeed, according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, he should pray without ceasing" (cf. 1 Th. 5:17) (n. 12).

By our prayers of petition we affirm our belief that God is alive in history, that history itself is open-ended, not predetermined, not a prison of necessary cause-and-effect relationships. The new is always a possibility. Tomorrow will be different from today because the ground and the depth of human history is wholly gracious toward men.

Your emphasis on gratitude and the supremacy of God's will is exactly right. We do not pray to God with the idea of getting him to change his mind about things, as if he were, after all, a kind of grand puppeteer, manipulating history for his own pleasure and amusement. We pray instead that everything we do will make his presence among us more fully real and recognizable, and we give thanks because we realize that the wonderful things that happen to us (such as the experience of friendship) are not produced by our own efforts alone but come to us as marvelous and unforeseen gifts.

COURIER 2

## Focus on the Learner

By REV. CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ

One of the most obvious aspects of Jesus' teaching was His flexible adaptation to His listeners. His focus was on the learner as well as on His own message.

When discussing a point with the learned scribes, He would frequently adapt his approach to their highly technical way of arguing from the Scriptures. With mature but less educated adults He was usually very concrete and human, using the ordinary language of everyday life even when teaching the deepest mysteries. His apostles received special instructions beyond what the crowds could grasp, yet without the subtleties of rabbinical logic. Children received from the Teacher chiefly affection and His blessing, learning in that way the attractiveness and tenderness of God's love.

With Nicodemus Jesus spoke directly but gently, respecting the sensitivities of a man so genuine yet so fearful that he dared come only under cover of darkness. He played upon the curiosity and basic honesty of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The rich young man was challenged by Jesus with an ideal directed to the gener-

osity of youth. Pharisees heard from Jesus threats and condemnation aimed at piercing their stiffnecked hypocrisy, whereas the repentant adulterous woman received a gentle admonition to sin no more.

Most Christians admire the sensitive skill of Jesus, the Master Teacher, in adapting Himself and His message to the capabilities of His listeners. However, many Catholics are not aware that many of the changes in religious education approaches today are based on Jesus' principle of adaptation to His learners.

Admitting imperfection in their attempts, contemporary religious educators are conscientiously attempting to shape their efforts according to the example of Jesus.

Adaptation affects every aspect of parish religious education today, but is most obvious in the newer religious texts which differ so much from the older catechisms.

A deeply human and very learned introduction to a catechism composed in 1683 highlights the very contemporary concern to focus religious education on the learner. Monsignor Fleury wrote at that time in France: "After you

have quite exhausted yourself making the children or country folk repeat several hundred times that there is in God three persons and one nature, while in Jesus Christ there are two natures in one person, you will run the risk of hearing them respond that there are two persons in one nature and three natures in one person . . . And this comes from the fact that they have no idea what the words 'nature' and 'person' mean."

His solution is to follow the example of Jesus, the prophets, and early Christian teachers like St. Augustine, "They spoke the common language of men: their expressions were simple, clear, concrete, without losing anything in grandeur and nobility. They communicated clear but living ideas, and made great use of the imagination, since few people are able to think without its help."

His final principle is that the teacher study the mentality and language of the learners and "enter into their mentality, so that he may to the greatest extent possible, accommodate himself to them." This is exactly the advice of Vatican II for contemporary religious educators.

For those equipped to understand abstract and technical philosophical language, it can be very illuminating to speak of "substance and accident," or "hypostatic union" or "redemptive incarnation." But the doctrine in question can be expressed and learned in other ways more suited to most people, and adapted to the capacities of various stages of life.

Small children may learn the deepest meaning of "grace" by being loved with faithfulness and understanding, and gradually educated to praise and thank God.

The young adolescent may gain insight into the same doctrine by honestly exploring his own relationships with others and reflecting on them in the light of the Gospel.

Adults may well find an avenue of approach to grasping the meaning of "grace" through their experiences of marital love and the biblical theme of "covenant." It may well be that a Catholic, young or old, knows how to define "sanctifying" and "actual" grace without grasping its meaning because it has never been seen in the context of his experiences, interests, or abilities. Therefore religious educators today follow Jesus' examples of adapting their teaching to the needs and abilities of their learner.



Man with Computer

Man today, with computers to aid his thinking, still must focus on a learner as well as on a message, just as Jesus adapted his own message to his listeners.

Wednesday, September 9, 1970

Page 5-B