

Christian Education

Some Strategies for Success

It is more important to know God than to know about God. Surely the Cure of Ars and Joan of Arc are proof enough of that. And yet—very wrongly, I believe—we tell youngsters all about God for 12 years and very rarely show ways the youngsters can meet this elusive and, to them, most academic "subject."



Then we assume, since the "subject" has been explained so often, that the youngsters understand it, accept it and (because it was memorized) will remember it. Such enviable naivete flies directly in the face of every teacher's experience. Moreover, what adult can still rattle off the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, or the cardinal sins or any other catechism answers after the first two or three? Nor did memorizing the catechism seem to daunt Adolf Hitler or James Joyce or Dutch Schultz. What kept us in the Church was not catechism answers; it was felt faith and hope and love and need.

Nonetheless, we are intelligent human beings and rational probing of the data of our faith carries experience of God into the realms of understanding and fulfills our purpose as images of the All-Knowing Father. However, there are three different aspects of learning peculiar to religious education: (1) knowledge of the facts (cognition), what can be called academic theology, which can be formally tested and graded just like any other academic course—it is not what you believe but what you know; (2) individual acceptance of the facts as truly meaningful in one's own life (realization), what can be called personal belief, which can be elicited and assessed but not formally tested by exams; (3) actual incorporation of those facts into one's personal life (transformation), what can be called religious conversion, perhaps observable but rarely verbalized adequately and surely ungradable.

The job of religious educators—teachers, pastors and parents—is hopefully to lead their children through not merely the first but all three stages in regard to the core of the Christian Message. How? There are two quite different approaches to that triple task. In the first strategy, the child's immediate questions and receptivities dictate the matter; in the second strategy, the Message is primary and, although the teacher tries to relate it to the child's needs, knowledge of the Message comes first.

The first strategy's strength lies in its immediacy of relevance; its weakness is that it sometimes fails to open up the student to a wider horizon than the one he has—which is precisely what "conversion" means. The second strategy's strength lies in its clarity and its complete coverage of religious topics; its weakness is that children "learn" the matter whether they find it meaningful enough to remember or not.

On the one hand, there is a value in collages, films and discussions. But it can be deceptive. It can go on too long, long after the time when youngsters need some solid logic. Discussions can be a mere pooling of ignorance or a way to "one up" the teacher. Just as with English and declining SAT scores, religious education can give in, once more going in TV's door and staying there. It can, in short, pander without challenging.

On the other hand, there can be a value in strict academic theology, apologetics and even to some extent memorizing. But it too, can be deceptive. It can begin far too early, as if the use of real reasoning actually did begin at age seven. Any religious educator knows that sophomores will yawn over material that seniors will be truly enthusiastic about. ("Why didn't they tell us this before!" "We did. You yawned.") What's more, it can become as uninvolved and unrelated to everyday life-decisions as math or history. It can, in short, be bloodless.

The greatest obstacle to youngsters' comprehension of academic theology (as distinguished from religion) is their rock-bound resistance to nuance. Accustomed as they are to instant everything, they want instant religious answers—which is just what the catechism gave them! But they are dissatisfied with that, too, eagerly finding flaws and raising objections and—for fear of being hoaxed again—adopting a show-me attitude. But showing them requires a great deal of nuance and careful distinction and shadings of meanings—of which they are completely impatient. In

absolute contradiction, they want religion both univocally simple and thoroughly complex at the same time!

Ten years ago, I said to a class of very bright seniors, "I find it difficult to understand how many people, frequently in their lives could perfectly fulfill the three requirements for mortal sin. What do 'sufficient' reflection and 'full' consent really mean?" That's what I said; it was written in my class notes. But before the day was out, the then-rector had me on the carpet and growled, "What's this I hear about you saying there's no such thing as mortal sin!" When I told him I hadn't said it because I don't believe it, he replied, "Well, I've had two different parents call and say you did!"

What had happened? What probably happened with about three out of ten readers of the preceding paragraph on this very page! Re-read and you'll see. Note that I never said I didn't accept; I said "I find it hard to understand." Note also that I didn't say sin was impossible but spoke of "many people frequently in their lives perfectly fulfilling the requirements." All the nuance and qualification dropped out, and at least two students were left with nothing but the subject, verb and object, i.e. what they wanted to hear me say.

Concretely, what can we do? I believe that collages and films have a place in religious education—in the lower levels of elementary school, and in ever-decreasing doses afterwards. In the latter years of elementary school, by all means let there be memory of the catechism. As with English grammar or Monopoly or baseball, there is no way around learning the rules of the game and practicing them over and over—and high school students' theological "illiteracy" is appalling. But let this catechism be stripped to the barest essentials, not totally comprehensive. And let it be geared to the children's lives and receptivities, not incomprehensible data. What purpose is served in giving children answers about the relationships in the Trinity or the Virgin Birth or simony or hell? What would Jesus have considered it important for young children to know?

Finally, from the beginning, let us engage our children in such excellent experiences as Reality, Seminar, retreats and practice in methods of prayer—even if they have to be adapted to grade-school students. It is not primarily theologians we are training; it is saints. Our primary goal is not mere cognition but the transformation of what being human can mean, the opening of one's horizons, in a word, conversion.

Theology Is an Adult Endeavor

It is a painful fact that, just when a young person is ready to begin a serious study of theology, he stops his formal religious education. Just at the time he becomes intellectually capable and even willing to cope with nuance and detail in mathematics, literature and other disciplines, he leaves religious studies behind in high school.

When, for instance, was the last time most parents read a challenging book on modern theology or scripture, one that might open both their cognitive and affective horizons on religious questions? Even setting aside the deepening of their own Christian lives, the parents are in a far better position to cope with their children's questions than any other teacher. Unfortunately, though, when I ask student's each year to ask their parents what they think of God, most prefer just to guess without asking. They're too afraid of a hassle or too arrogant or too reluctant to jar their comfortable preconceptions of what their parents think. Or they're afraid their parents don't know. And yet, religious education is primarily the job of the parent—not merely to monitor the texts and doctrine of teachers (even though the parent has not read a theology book in years), not only to coerce the children to Mass, but intelligently and fearlessly to cope with their children's understandings. But if the parent's own theological learning stopped in 1948 or 1958, his theological knowledge may be 20 years behind his child's!

The susceptibility to real theologizing begins somewhere in high school—not in the first two years (for most), but earlier than most readers would think. Three years ago, for the first time, I taught exactly the same course (in scripture and myth) to both seniors and sophomores. Rather than the catechism, I gave a 20-point quiz every single class. They hated me for it. So be it. On the purely cognitive level, there was very little difference at all. The grade-range was exactly the same in each of the three senior and five sophomore classes. Most of them knew the raw facts and could dish them back to me.



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But the difference in realization was enormous. The questions raised by the seniors, the intentness of their attention, the free responses they wrote were so much more mature that I wondered if the course was not only wasted on sophomores but—beyond the bare "meaningless" data—outside their real understanding. Furthermore, this year I am again teaching each of the same young men I taught two years ago as sophomores—but now they are seniors. The difference in the ability to understand at a deeper level is stunning. At the age of 15, they weren't capable even of hearing what they could hear at 17. It does not have to be enjoyable, but it does have to be comprehensible—to him.

And yet we cannot leave all challenging courses until senior year! It is my suspicion that we do not challenge students enough—on a strictly academic level. We can and do raise their awareness of social problems—often in a vicarious and distant way. They are too young at 15 (perhaps) actually to work in a nursing home or the Sigi Center. Moreover, they have no sense of history, so that the story of Israel and the Church has as little relevance to their own lives as Cinderella or Jack and the Beanstalk.

If that's where they are, then let's take them where they are: able to accumulate notional knowledge (not only by memorizing but by repetition) but also able to be held for hard facts, for cognitive reception and for at least academic understanding. If they have opinions, let them back them up with evidence and strict logic.

Over and above sheer academic ability, however, "something" ordinarily happens to almost all youngsters in or by their junior year. Perhaps it is puberty and dating, the real internalized discovery of others as persons like oneself—for the first time. At that stage, the threshold of their response noticeably begins to deepen toward an adult level. Further, in all other subjects they are beginning to deal with a more complex logic: trigonometry, chemistry, sociology, etc. Why not in religious education? To keep youngsters in the catechism at that stage is both distrustful and wasteful of good minds.

In the final two years of high school I am certain that at least most students are very able to cope with far more than ingestion and repetition of data; they are ready to begin moving from theological cognition to theological realization—a process I pray, nearly in vain, they will not "complete" even after they are parents themselves.

NEXT WEEK: Individual receptivities.

