

**Christian Education**

**Teachers: Be Aware of Students' Mental Growth**

By FATHER WILLIAM O'MALLEY, SJ

Not only is there a difference between the receptivities of seniors and sophomores, but there is also a difference between the receptivities of one individual sophomore and another. Teachers and parents have always had a vague realization of that fact, but the recent research of Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg (in moral receptivity) and Dr. James Fowler (in faith receptivity) has brought this vague awareness into clear focus.



**MORAL RECEPTIVITY**

Working from the results of Piaget and Erikson in the development of children's minds, Kohlberg saw that his young subjects proceeded through certain predictable stages of growth on the way to moral maturity. Not only was he able to isolate those stages but he was also able to establish by years of exhaustive research that, although one could remain "frozen" at a particular stage no stage could be bypassed on the way to a higher stage. Moreover, no child could be forced to move from one stage to another.

This summary is painfully sketchy, but it must suffice for our purpose here. Kohlberg observed a first "preconventional" or pre-moral stage in young children—and even in adults. In this earliest phase of moral choices, the child sees right and wrong as an arbitrary construction of rules set up (for no apparent reason) by adults. It's their game, and since they have the food supply and the belt, one plays it. Right or wrong have no meaning in themselves but only in relation to whether they lead to reward or punishment. A little boy refrains from calling his sister a hedgehog, not because it is unkind or will hurt her but because it will inevitably hurt him. She'll tell, and "Mommy spank." All children, without exception, begin here, and some even stay here into an otherwise adult life.

In the middle, "conventional" phase, older children are gradually able to achieve some understanding that laws — "right or wrong" — are based on the needs of societies, which demand that we not hurt one another. "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." If the family or team or school or country is going to function at all, we have to have rules. Thus, "the Vatican says" or "the government says" is presumed to be unquestionably valid and is obeyed.

Not everyone reaches the final, "post-conventional" stage wherein he would act morally even though there were no laws. At this level one can be said to have gone "beyond laws" — which to some sounds anarchic and antinomian, marching to one's own private drummer. It is not. It simply means that such an individual has personally discovered the reason for which the law was framed in the first place. Before, one went to Mass because the third commandment required it and obeyed his mother because the fourth commandment required it; now, he does both because he understands why ignoring God and his mother were sins even before the commandments were written. He realizes the great gifts God and His mother gave him: existence—and all that comes from that gift. Before the law obligated him; now, he obligates himself.

In the four years of high school, one sees almost all (but not all) youngsters move from the pre-conventional to the conventional stage. But it is a marvelous experience to see those who are gradually able to move from the second stage toward the third, post-conventional motivation for moral conduct. But as Kohlberg has shown conclusively, children on the pre-conventional (reward-punishment) level may be able to get a vague awareness of conventional (mutual advantage) level, but they cannot understand why anyone would obey the law even though all the policemen went on strike and all the judges and jails were abolished. Thus, a boy who gets away with all he can might be led to control himself by suggestions that his own life would be pretty miserable if everyone acted as he does. But he would question your sanity if you spoke to him in terms of personal integrity.

This limitation is not due to a particular youngster's lack of intelligence or sensitivity; it is due to lack of maturity. Like Helen Keller, he is not yet able to comprehend the game in the palm of his hands. But with the patience and dogged persistence of Annie Sullivan in both his teacher and his parents, he may.

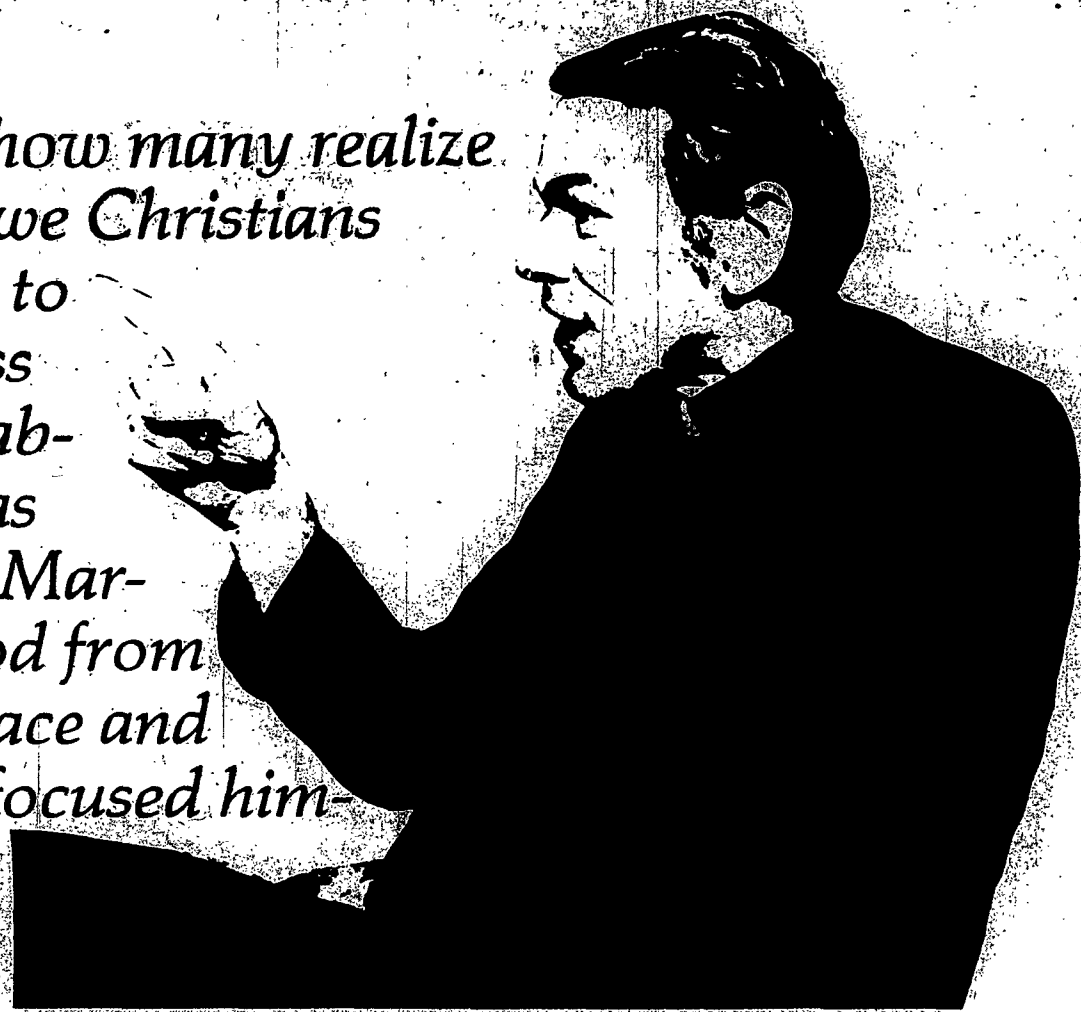
**FAITH RECEPTIVITY**

A student of Kohlberg, Dr. James Fowler, has conducted similar intensive research into the predictable stages and transitions young people pass through in their ability to make an act of faith in an unseen Supreme Being. As with Kohlberg, this sketch is painfully inadequate and the jargon a bit arcane, but the insights are most helpful for parents and teachers.

The first stage, the "intuitive-projective," is dominated by perception and feeling: sensory experience of dryness, warmth, full tummy, shiny objects is the limit of his understanding. As with Helen Keller, as far as this child is concerned, he is the only person in a small world.

The second stage, the "mythic-literal," begins between the ages of six and eleven but, like puberty, the transition is different in each individual. This is the story-telling stage in which one understands his environment in terms of heroes and villains rather than by using abstract concepts. Here he can begin to role-play, pretending to be a knight or a dragon. The roles are clear. There need be no wondering

*I wonder how many realize that what we Christians claim is — to the faithless — as palpably foolish as UFOs and Martians: a God from beyond space and time who focused himself into a man from Galilee.*



why the witch is wicked; that's her job. In a sense, it is an "Archie Bunker" phase from which some never escape.

The third stage, the "synthetic-conventional, is the conformist stage which begins in late childhood and may last through adolescence — and even to the end of one's adult life. It manifests a keen awareness of the expectations and judgments of others — whether peers or parents or teachers, or all three. Such a person does not think out his beliefs independently but "borrows" them from a group consensus or from some trusted authority. He is much like those in Kohlberg's central stage: the uncritical believer, the unquestioning patriot, the groupie. But even though accepted uncritically, the feelings generated by beliefs at this stage (in rock music or in the Church) are deeply felt and provide a comforting and stable environment. It is this environment in the Church which was threatened by Vatican II. The loyal and uncritical believer felt betrayed by the very group and authority on which he had faithfully based his life.

The fourth stage, the "independent reflexive," sees life in a new, autonomous perspective, much like the Kohlberg third stage. The person is less and less dependent on others to do his thinking for him and give him the answers. Before he commits himself, he wants to know why, and he is willing to make a personal effort to search out the reasons. The "God questions" are too important to allow him to accept answers merely on the authority of someone else, no matter how learned or pious. He feels personally responsible for his commitments, whether to the Church or his work or his home. But such people can pose a real threat to those at the third, loyally conformist stage. Such people look like trouble-makers or even like renegades and apostates to people at the third level.

The final stage (which few attain, according to Fowler) is the "paradoxical-consolidative," which hardly ever occurs before one is in his thirties. At this stage, one attains a wisdom and regains the powerful loyalty and willingness to compromise of the third stage. While still clinging to independence of thought, he is not as truculent as stage four. Here one is content to live with mystery and yet still patiently, peacefully to prove the mysteries more deeply. He is at home with paradox and is untroubled by uncertainty, because of the depth of his belief in the ultimate "rightness" of things and himself. Mohandas Ghandi was one, to be sure, and Thomas More.

Consider, then, at what stage a youngster is able, in any real sense, to comprehend a personal and transcendent God. For the later stages, the mythic attempts to embody the reality of God are insufficient: the man with the long white beard, a physical heaven with gates of pearl and streets of gold, angels with huge wings trailing yards of brocade. The more one learns of Einsteinian physics, the more he begins to question not the realities themselves, but the adequacy of the symbols used to try to capture those realities — to physicalize an entity which is not itself physical.

For instance, our more knowledgeable youngsters ask: if Jesus ascended "up" when he left our way of existing, where does a person from China go when he ascends to heaven? "Up," for him, is in the opposite direction. When one gets some comprehension of the immensity of the universe of which our earth no longer seems the center "up" has no meaning.

Does this mean that we should remove all angels from our Christmas cards? Of course not, any more than we would remove all hearts from our valentines. Angels capture the reality of divine messages as inadequately as hearts capture the reality of love, but inadequate is better than nothing at all. The problem would be to suppose that

anyone who has trouble with the adequacy of the symbol automatically disbelieves in the reality the symbol represents.

The religious educator — pastor, parent, teacher — who remains unaware of his children's scientific sophistication does so at his own peril. Moreover, if he pooh-poohs such questions or responds to them with an unbending deference to Copernican or even Euclidian science and symbols, he or she has lost a very good potential Christian. The child is searching for God on level four and the teacher is back in level two or three! Unless the youngster can find someone who knows a bit about modern science and still believes in a transcendent God, the student will quite probably leave the God questions, and turn his very good mind to a study of a this-world, godless reality.

I often wonder how many pastors and parents are still trying to understand (i.e. theologize about) the realities underneath the Biblical symbols of God, heaven, angels, etc. I wonder how many claim they are too busy but are afraid that such a search would threaten their faith. I wonder how many realize that what we Christians claim is — to the faithless — as palpably foolish as UFOs and Martians: a God from beyond space and time who focused himself into a man from Galilee. It is wondrous! Realizing and praying over the realities beneath the symbols sure keeps Mass from being boring!

As with Kohlberg's moral stages, Fowler's research has shown that none of these stages of receptivity to wider and more profound faith can be skipped — though one can move into a particular stage and never go further. True here, too, is Kohlberg's discovery that someone in one stage can vaguely comprehend the motivations of someone one stage above him but hasn't the slightest notion what is said by anyone two stages above. Thus, if a parent or teacher is honestly proposing the beauties of the mysterious Trinity to a youngster at level three (conformist), he or she is wasting breath. On the other end, trying to motivate faith in a level-four (independent) thinker using "the pope says" or "everyone believes in God" is equally futile.

The extent of research in these two areas and its careful scrutiny by academicians and theologians seem to leave its conclusions undeniable. It also leaves parents, pastors and teachers with several problems. One problem is that in a class of 35, a teacher will be dealing with students on four levels of receptivity to belief and commitment — with one textbook and one class plan! The only practicable answer, I suppose, is consciously to seed each class with arguments accessible to each level. Difficult, but perhaps necessary.

It would be far better, of course, if the teacher could count on the parent being aware of these natural levels of receptivity, discuss the individual child with his parents on that common ground of realization, and help the parent get into the effort of gradually and patiently bringing the child from one level to the next higher one. (One caution: it is very unwise to use these levels as "bins," they are flexible. It is also very unwise to let oneself think that being "a level-two person" is somehow a bad thing, like being stupid or stubborn. It is a natural stage which can be improved, provided — and only provided — one offers motivations for growth which the youngster can truly hear, and not motivations which don't even make sense to his receptivities.)

In recent months, I have read articles in Catholic periodicals scoffing at the work of Piaget, Kohlberg and Fowler, as if it were some modernist heresy trying to undermine the faith. To anyone who knows a bit of history, it is consoling to remember that for 50 years after his death even Thomas Aquinas was accused of heresy.