

Christian Education

A 'Rough Outline' for Educators

(Last in a Series)

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In his life time, Our Lord spoke to all levels in his disciples too. He invoked the motive of fear of punishment; he told symbolic stories to elicit faith; he challenged the conformism of the Pharisees; he acted with utter independence of what others might think; and he called for the most extreme altruism: crucifixion with him.

Jesus could be pretty harshly demanding: if you love mother or father more than me, you are not worthy of me; sell all you have and give it to the poor; if you are lukewarm, I vomit you out of my mouth. That's real level-five motivation! To expect a child whose every subconscious moment is tyrannized by what others think of him to assent to that is naive in the extreme.

Rather, Jesus said, "Let him who has ears hear." It is a call to one who truly does have faith to "come up higher". Not many of us have the freedom of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But I fear many teachers, parents and pastors forget that. I wonder if, in making the Gospel challenge too great, too soon, we do not scare many away. Jesus still loved the rich young man, even after he was unable to rise to the full challenge of the Message.

Mother Teresa (or Our Lord) is not the norm of being a Christian, but the ideal. Both those realizations are important. Jesus did not expect everyone to be able to sell all and follow him. Martha stayed with her pots and Nicodemus stayed with the Sanhedrin. The first pope, let us remember, denied knowing Jesus within hours of his ordination -- and not because of threats from a soldier but because of taunts from a waitress! This Church is catholic -- a spectrum not only of all Christian points of view but of all degrees of Christian commitment. And Jesus and his Father apparently love them all, even the prodigals, indiscriminately.

But Mother Teresa and Jesus are the ideal. They are at the far end of the spectrum beckoning to each of us. It is the job of every Christian not only to edge further but to help others edge further, too. The word "edge" is also important. Thunderclaps on the road to Rome or Damascus are rare. And yet very often, subconsciously, I think many of us expect or at least pray for them in our young. Annie Sullivan patiently drew signs in Helen Keller's hands, trusting that some day there would be that moment at the pump.

The answer for parents of "straying Christians" is not sheer dumb faith, however. The answer is "patient aggressiveness," like the old widow wearing down the unjust judge or the neighbor hammering on the door till he gets his loaf of bread. And we must remember, "Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the increase."

Nonetheless, we cannot on the other hand dilute the challenges of the Gospel into some vague "nice-guy" humanism. In all honesty, we may be settling too readily for that, in the name of peace: don't hurt anybody; be kind (to your friends); don't do anything excessive; and you'll be a good Christian. That's several cuts above "take care of old number one", and it's not to be sneered at, but it's not even inside the door of Christianity. Jesus never asked us to be "nice guys"; he presumed that. What he asked of us was to be as much like his complete selflessness as we are able. At the very least, we have to be sons and daughters, alive with the aliveness of our Father -- and to act as if we know we are. He asks us to recognize him disguised in all

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the outcasts along our road to Jericho. And there are more youngsters ready for that forthright challenge than I think we have suspected.

But how often has a boy told me that his father responded to his desire to serve as a teacher or social worker with: "Come on! How much can you make doing that?" What Catholic parent, given the choice, would rather see his son as Damien among the rotting lepers of Molokai rather than the president of IBM? How many parents realize, when they have a Bible at home, how subversive that book is of the competitive values we openly admire? If religious education is failing to produce the effects we'd hoped for, perhaps we could find a clue in the old Pogo cartoon: we have met the enemy, and he is us.

A Spectrum of Doctrines

One major obstacle to cooperation between the so-called right side and left side of the issue of religious education is, I think, the reluctance of the right to agree that there is also a spectrum of doctrines in the Church.

Surely there are non-negotiables, to deny which is to deny the roots of Christianity itself: the divinity of Jesus Christ, the sharing of the divine aliveness (grace) within us, the real enlivening presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the true eradication of sinfulness in confession, etc. Also surely, we have doctrines, usually disciplinary, which have hardly any real importance at all: how many times the bell is rung at the Elevation, whether women should wear hats in church, removing St. Christopher from the calendar of the saints, etc.

Between these two extremes lie matters whose importance ranges from the weighty to the trivial. It would be a great service to the faithful if our bishops could remove the following questions from the all-or-nothing state in which many Catholics see them and show their importance in relation to the nonnegotiables: which new ideas are too dangerous to handle yet? What is the individual's obligation to the varying statements of our bishops? What would be threatened if Our Lord had been born of a woman not a virgin? What is the obligation of a priest to say his breviary every day?

We cannot put our minds in neutral and say that every pronouncement from the Vatican -- whether from the pope himself or from one of his many curial assistants -- has equal weight. This would be a kind of "creeping infallibility." Then not only every word of the pope becomes unquestionable but every word of a bishop, priest or nun. Even Vatican I and Pius IX did not mean that.

I have found that one of the greatest impediments to securing the Gospel and the Church a fair hearing is the issue of birth control. Smart young people can't understand why the Church, rather than frustrate the function of an ovary, would frustrate the function of a total person. The same young people would agree with the Church's stand on abortion, war, the Third World, and so forth. And yet they take that stance on artificial birth control and, with total illogic, make it a symbol for all that the Church says. They discover what they suspect are clay feet in the once-idealized Church, and the whole idol comes tumbling down. It is sad, but anyone who wants to teach religion to youngsters ought to realize that it is a very strong impediment.

Furthermore, let us also admit that faith is neither a commitment made after every doubt has been removed nor a commitment without the slightest shred of evidence. Faith is both calculated and a risk. It is not certain knowledge; it is a well-researched bet. And anyone who makes a bet without some doubt is either brainless or owns the casino. But countless students have told me that they thought doubt or hesitation over the pronouncements of the Church was a sin! Where do they get that idea? Perhaps from those of us who argued too definitively. Perhaps from those of us unwilling to share our own doubts with those we teach. Perhaps from those who, without realizing, give the impression that our intelligences are less a gift from God than the decrees of the magisterium.

The Essentials

What follows is not a syllabus. Nor is it in sequential order on a four-year high school scale. It merely attempts to give a rough outline which might help departments



assess the thoroughness of their own curricula and might help parents narrow the overwhelming scope of "religious education" to a manageable size. It is far less comprehensive than the new Catechetical Directory and, for that very reason, perhaps more practicable.

In four years of high school Catholic education, a student should have had the opportunity to investigate, question, articulate and internalize his own personal answers to questions in the following areas:

— What is human fulfillment? What will make me happy and worthwhile as a human being? What answers to these questions are given by psychology, materialism, communism, atheism, non-Christian religions, Christianity? How should I judge the success or failure of a human life: Mine?

— Is there a God? What would be the consequences to my individual life if there were no God? What would it be like to live some years and then die and, truly, cease to be real forever? What are the consequences in my life if there is a God? What would be my indebtedness so such a Being? What evidence is there for me to trust in God's existence? Is science really in opposition to religion? To what level of faith do I want to commit myself here and now?

— What is God like? Who has known God and can tell me about him? Why should I accept the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as a privileged self-communication of God? Why should works written so long ago have anything to say to me, in a far different, more modern world? If, like the language of Shakespeare, scripture is so dense and foreign to me, how can I learn to read it without a teacher? How can I learn to understand what God is saying through scripture to me personally?

— How can I relate to God? Alone in prayer? Through communal prayer and worship? Through response to the needs of my neighbors?

— How does God's idea of human fulfillment affect my relationships with my neighbors? Why become actively engaged in an institutionalized Church focused around the Eucharist? What are the limits of my obligation to this community and its authority? What is my personal commitment to it? Do the sacraments of the Church work a real internal change in me and my relationships? Why was I baptized without my consent? Why should I reaffirm that hurt, what does sin do? Why can't I confess my sins directly to God without a priest? Why should anyone go to Mass so often? What can I do if my parish doesn't seem to offer me meaningful worship? What difference is there between marriage before a priest and marriage before a judge? Why marry at all? How do these sacraments provide any real encounter with the living Christ? How can I tell, if I don't feel any different after them?

— How can I tell what actions are really right or really wrong? What obligations do I have in justice and love: to God, to myself, to my family, to my friends, to my bosses, to my country, to strangers? Why do human beings, including myself, do evil things? If God is good, why would he create a world where there is so much suffering? What role does sexuality play in God's idea of human fulfillment? How can I identify a moral problem, evolve alternative approaches to it, assess those alternatives honestly in the light of the Church's teachings, and come to a personal decision about it?

— Finally, to what degree do I want to commit myself to continue probing the Christian Message? When?

Conclusion

Either all of us -- children and hierarchy, parents and pastors and teachers, liberals and conservatives -- face this problem of youthful disinterest together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, or the next generation of the Church will be severely diminished indeed.

Let us face this very real crisis among the young (and not so young) as our savior taught us: with truly open minds, truly open hearts, truly open hands. The Spirit is with us -- on the promise of our Savior -- because we are the Church: the whole mixtum-gatherum spectrum of us. God forbid that our clinging to the good old days -- or to our entrenched positions -- or to our impatience for change -- should block that Spirit from enlivening the next generation of God's People with the super-aliveness of our common Father.