

REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (7)

Faith Formation & Adult Education

Well, who knew?

It turns out that when we get serious about faith formation and adult education, everything in the parish changes: the collections go up, complaints go down, more people are involved, fewer people are on the side lines, the Sunday liturgy has more heart, the parish priest is as happy as can be, and the whole parish is renewed!

The ultimate goal of all we're doing in adult catechesis is simple and straightforward. It's to help all Catholics become adult Christians of mature faith and a parish composed of such mature people is a joy to be in.

How adult formation happens

The process of adult faith formation in a parish turns on two key experiences in the Christian life: conversion to Christ, and learning how to live with self-giving love, i.e., how to die to oneself as Jesus taught us to do. These two go hand in hand, of course. Sometimes the acts of self-giving love and sacrifice produce deeper conversion. Other times, the conversion process makes us more able to love selflessly. These two faith experiences are the groundwork of all we're talking about here.

Over the years, we have devoted ourselves to providing "education classes" for adults and children alike. We've been intent on "instructing" people in the faith. The first things we usually think about when we want to increase or improve adult education are what new classes to offer, what new resources to develop, and what new teachers to invite.

Instruction of this sort seems so sure and fool proof and it does have its place in faith formation. But it's not the first step. As the Church's Directory for Catechesis points out, "conversion precedes catechesis." Without conversion, all the religious education we do is like the seed that fell on the weedy ground. It doesn't grow and mature because for that to happen, we must first know Jesus as Friend and Helper and that "knowing Jesus" is what conversion makes possible. Offering people opportunities for conversion that will set the parish and their hearts on fire is not complicated or expensive.

Conversion

So, how can we help people experience adult conversion? Didn't we all "receive Christ" at baptism and don't we receive him every Sunday in Communion? Well, yes, of course, all of that is true but for many people, baptism is a faint memory and even Holy Communion no longer moves their hearts. They think of "conversion" as something that others should do.

But conversion of the sort we're discussing here is profound and powerful because it leads to having a deep relationship with Jesus. It moves us to turn our hearts to him, and to be conscious that he walks with us day in and day out. It moves us at the level of the heart and this is life-changing. Once people begin to

experience that Jesus is present, the desire to know and understand him grows. And that's when we can begin to offer classes, seminars, courses, retreats, and other methods of adult formation.

So, one big question for the Archdiocese has to do with how we help adult Catholics experience this conversion, the turning of the heart to Jesus. We have this same question about young adults and young people too.

It's important to remember that conversion happens every day, unfolding slowly throughout our lives, little by little, moment by moment.

How does this sort of conversion happen?

Well, the most profound way that people experience this conversion is through opportunities for sharing faith. Sharing faith is more vital than learning religious facts. Believe it or not, the simple act of sharing faith awakens in us the awareness that Christ is nearby. It teaches us to be conscious every day that Jesus walks with us, embraces us even when we're muddled or selfish, and loves us without conditions. It takes very little time to pause together and listen to each other as we share faith.

Faith sharing is a form of spiritual accompaniment. When we trust our own stories to others in this way and listen attentively and non-judgmentally to them, we accompany one another to healing, to forgiveness, in short, to the way and person of Jesus.

Many Catholics belong to parishes and come to Mass regularly, and they've been doing this for many years, but no one has ever invited them to share faith. For most people, no one in the parish has ever asked about the stories of their lives, the ones that reveal the presence of Jesus. This lack of being in touch with each other is what opens the door to people dropping out. If people don't invest in a relationship with anyone else, it's easy to fade away slowly. Sadly, no one ever notices.

And what is the "topic" about which we share faith? It's remarkably simple and right in front of us. We share our daily lives. Embedded in the stories of our daily lives is a divine summons or invitation. We can hear Jesus calling us as he walks with us and his invitation is always to self-giving love, to generosity, forgiveness, and humility, to self-sacrifice and withholding judgements.

How do we know this? Because we learned it from Jesus himself! So, the topic of faith sharing is not complex theology, or even Scripture or liturgy. It's life. The questions to ask are: What happened in your life this week? How did you notice God's hand in that? How have you had to die to yourself? To what do you think God is inviting you?

Once we have shared our faith this way, the sacraments start to make sense. We come to understand how we must die in Christ through baptism and reconciliation. We find within ourselves a profound desire for communion with Christ and our friends. We experience healing and peace. Faith sharing is good news, indeed!

REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (8)

Catholic Schools

What sets out Catholic schools apart from any other school?

What unique gift do we offer our pupils that they can get only from us? You might think that, well, we offer them the sacraments and that's what makes us so Catholic. Or that we offer them our carefully elaborated Catholic doctrine, laws, and dogma. And you're right, these are important factors and essential in our schools. But those elements are also on offer in every parish.

To know Jesus as Friend and Helper

What we want for our pupils is what we just spoke about as a desire for the adults of the parish. Do you recall how *The Joy of the Gospel* invites us to turn our hearts to Christ? We studied this earlier in these sessions but because it's so important, let's take another look.

"I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ... No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord" (Article 3).

And there you have it. When we offer our pupils this encounter with Jesus we offer them a gift that lasts a lifetime! I mean, our sacraments are important, and our doctrine and laws. But a person could attend Mass every week – every day for that matter, could follow all the laws of the Church, and could recite the doctrine perfectly, but if he or she doesn't know Jesus, hasn't developed a relationship with him, and hasn't allowed Jesus to love them, everything else matters not.

So, the first thing we offer our pupils that makes us unique is this encounter with Jesus. We want every student to know Jesus in this intimate way to walk with him as a friend and to love the Church, which is the body of Christ. When we evaluate ourselves and our schools, we must ask, "How are we doing in this effort?"

To Experience God's forgiveness

The second thing we want for every student in our schools is to know that God has forgiven all their sins.

Life can be muddled and difficult for young people in their school years. They're growing to maturity and learning social skills, learning right from wrong and helpful from harmful. And they will all make mistakes and sometimes commit sins, hurting themselves and others, and carrying the guilt of what they have done. But—and this is something more difficult to believe than anything else—Jesus forgives us "seventy times seven times," or, in other words, endlessly. We want our pupils to be aware of their sins so they can also know and experience God's great mercy.

Returning to article 3 of *The Joy of the Gospel*: "Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy." What a great gift this is for our pupils!

And we Catholics specialise in passing on this good news. We have a rich understanding of sin and forgiveness which only make sense since we are all sinners leading other sinners to Jesus. Knowing that Jesus forgives them is the second most important gift we give our pupils.

To form one's conscience

Our third desire for each student is also something which is very Catholic. We want every student to form and learn to follow his or her conscience.

In this paraphrase from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1776) and the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (#16) we see the profound beauty of our teaching.

"Deep within our conscience we discover a law which we have not laid upon ourselves but which we must obey. Its voice, ever calling us to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in our hearts at the right moment. For we have in our hearts a law inscribed by God. Our conscience is our most secret core and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths."

Just look at that last line again: alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. We want to help our pupils hear this voice, shaped by Church teaching and echoing within them and we want to help them obey it.

To learn from Home, School, Parish

And the fourth desire we have for our pupils, especially those who are Catholic, is the thing that unites these other three and makes an RE programme work wonders. We want our pupils to see and appreciate the connection between the parish in which they live and the schools in which they study. If we fail to do this—even if the RE programme is super—when they leave school, they'll be gone from the Church.

To build a life-long foundation for faith, pupils need to belong to a parish and feel involved and energised there. It follows, then, that the parents of our school children must also feel welcome and engaged with their parish. Parents are the primary educators of their children by how they live and what they say. So, we want to find ways to give the parents a key role in religious education, even in our schools. We want the curriculum the pupils are learning to be sent home where parents can share in it and this is happening already in many places.

If the student learns about Reconciliation at school, for example, but goes home and hears the parents call it all rubbish either by their words or actions, what chance do we have? But if, through a partnership between home and school in the context of parish liturgy and life, all share in the formation, you can expect miracles!

The relationship we are describing here among the home, the school, and the parish was a high priority for Synod members.

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