

Religious instruction needs to start in the family, but parents have been too long left unfed

When it comes to teenagers, you expect a certain amount of eye rolling and apathy, but put those same kids in a faith formation class for an hour and fifteen minutes at the end of a long school day and right at the dinner hour and you'll see a level of teenage disinterest that could make you wither on the spot. That's what my husband and I faced when we stood before the 21 high school sophomores we teach at our upstate New York parish.

The scene was nothing new and nothing unexpected. We taught most of the same kids last year since they're in a two-year program that will culminate in confirmation this spring. However, I'm willing to wager that their apathy isn't necessarily related to a surge of teenage surliness but rather to a lack of foundational catechesis, and I say that while having taught many of these kids in fourth and fifth grade. I have used every trick in the book—from group activities to stump-the-teacher sessions to outright bribery through baked ziti and brownies—to get these kids to hear me when I talk about the Mass, about the Gospel, about our beautiful Catholic teachings and traditions. Yet every year, when they reluctantly return to class, I find I'm grateful if even half of them remember the Our Father.

When I look out at these kids—regardless of age, regardless of whether they've gone to Catholic or public elementary school—I assume I am seeing 75 percent as future ex-Catholics.

The blame falls squarely in the lap of the Church, which has, for decades, let the parents of these children go spiritually hungry, through misguided catechesis in their youth and preaching that failed to challenge and engage them as adults. As Pope Francis told priests at ordination this year: “May your homilies not be boring; may your homilies touch the heart of the people because they come from your heart ...”

Some might say that even with unchallenging preaching the Holy Eucharist should be enough to draw people in, but how can that be if people have no grasp of the power and wonder of the Sacrament because no one has taught them—not in a classroom and not from the pulpit?

People are hungry, yes, but before they can run to Jesus in the Eucharist, they must walk into a parish on any given Sunday and hear the words that feed their flagging spirits and find fellowship that reminds them they are not alone. As a speaker and retreat leader I can tell you, from both personal experience and from encounters with other Catholics around the country that neither of those things exist in abundance in US parishes. Some communities are getting it right, but these lucky few are the sad exceptions, not the happy norm.

And so people go elsewhere. Perhaps to the nondenominational church up the street where the preaching is riveting and relevant and the community is fully engaged and made up predominantly of former Catholics. They don't have Eucharist, but people are feeling fed, and returning, week after week. When you sit in Mass this Sunday, try to experience it as a newcomer, and ask yourself: If this was your first and only experience of Catholicism, would you ever return?

Back when I wrote my *Complete Idiot's Guide to the Catholic Catechism*, I heard the same refrain time and again from adult Catholics disconnected from the faith: “Why didn't I learn any of this when I was growing up?” Many of them were raised, as I was, in what I call the “Era of the Collage,” with lots of cutting and pasting of happy Jesus, but little basic information about the things that sustain you for a lifetime, the beauty of a living, breathing faith. I credit my mother with bridging the wide chasm that grew between my official religious education and my actual faith, and that's why I know we first and foremost need our families to turn our Church around.

Catechesis must begin by drawing families in, by making them feel welcome, by giving them something more than registration deadlines and weekly envelopes. Only when they feel as though they belong in this Church—to this Church—will they be open to retracing the spiritual steps of their childhood and embracing the path of faith as an adult. When they do that, they will bring their children with them, and faith formation will no longer be seen as a ticket that must be stamped in order to receive a sacrament and then “graduate” from religion, but rather as a first step on a lifelong journey.

Of course teens will be teens, and they will still roll their eyes and answer questions with stony silence, but beneath that will be a foundation of real faith, and the powerful, life-giving knowledge that they are loved beyond measure by a God who created them, and saved them, and waits for them.

I believe the kids sitting in our class acting like they couldn't care less about religion desperately want and need a God like that, as do their parents. Unless we find a way to make God real and relevant to their lives, he will always remain an abstract idea to be sat through, rather than engaged, which is a loss not just for them but for all of us.

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