

The Gifts of Enthusiasm and Fidelity in a Technological World.

While we busily attend conferences, workshops and seminars on student learning styles, trends in contemporary religious issues and the needs of adolescents, our young people have been quietly revolutionizing the way they discover the world around them. Their behavior, undertaken with considerable speed and learned primarily through peer interaction, urgently requires those of us in the field of religious education to confront some fundamental questions about the way we approach effective catechesis and evangelization.

Most students in our classrooms today assume that the only thing needed to obtain "truth" is a simple Google search. Their electronic curriculum is shaped by the latest search engine inquiry and, unfortunately at times, this information is misinformation. Round-the-clock use of MySpace and Facebook are now the presumed ways to create online conversations and to build peer communities. Bravado becomes the name of the game as good parenting skills take a back seat to peer pressure. The need to be in constant cell phone communication with someone, actually anyone, leads the young person down a path where there is often a breakdown of boundaries. In addition, one needs only to step into any college residence hall room to find that multitasking with various electronic devices is the preferred way to spend leisure time. These influences lead to a variety of implications not the least of which is a careful examination of our Lasallian programs in order to insure their transformative nature.

As religious educators we need to constantly think about new ways to focus the next generation of Catholics on what it means to be men and women committed to the person of Jesus Christ. To facilitate that focus we have to keep current with the changing world of technology and be creative in the ways that our mission is faithful to the Gospel. In the Lasallian mission we

need people with a common passion that drives the bonds of people involved in the mission. As we reach out to young people we need to develop online publications that allow students to freely explore the World Wide Web, while providing an appropriate level of guidance concerning how to select and evaluate the sources that they find.¹ To develop those resources, we need to initiate conversations among enthusiastic students and faithful adults.

For educators to understand the world in which young people live and study, the arrangement of focus groups with adolescents to foster dialogue and collaboration between generations is a starting point. We already know that our students are used to communicating in interactive and elaborate online environments that are quite sophisticated, and therefore the traditional forms of catechesis and evangelization are at risk of being ignored if they do not evolve. We also need to observe students socializing, studying and relaxing on their own turf.

How do we invite students to see the world in which they live and study "with the eyes of faith" and how do we invite educators "to touch the hearts of their students"? To accomplish these tasks both students and teachers are encouraged to see their daily activities through a mystical dimension. This is no easy task for students as they become inundated with information and seldom encounter genuine formation. At all times and in all places Lasallian educators and their students are "to remember that they are in the holy presence of God." The teachers are first and foremost men and women of prayer...adults filled with an awareness of the presence of God. Young people search for enthusiasm, the fullness of God, and what better way to find it than in faithful educators?

Today teachers, who see their spirituality as an important daily reality, can clearly hear the echo of De La Salle to his early Brother teachers: experiences in life are filled with the

¹ Wittenberg, Kate, "Beyond Google: What Next for Publishing?" The Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. 52, Iss 41, p. B20, June 16, 2006.

presence of God. Our students are no exception to this reality. Their young lives rise and fall as their experiences fluctuate between anxiety and restlessness on the one hand and positive thinking and awareness of social concerns on the other. Periodically their lives may be marred by complaints, discouragement, hostility, or resentment, and yet God quietly holds out to them hopefulness, faith, patience and love. Young people need encouragement to seek God not only in these extremes but also in the intermediate moments of ordinary life.

Young people today have a genuine hunger for God. In April 2006 a national pool of 1,200 college students surveyed found that seven out of 10 students considered religion to be important in their lives. Another 25% indicated that they became more spiritual in their college years while only seven percent said they had become less spiritual.²

In another survey of almost 3,700 students by the *Spirituality in Higher Education Project (SHEP)*, sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, it was noted: "77% prayed, 71% found religion personally helpful and 73% claimed that religious beliefs shaped their identities. A still larger survey of 100,000+ of first-year students noted that then expected the college experience to enhance their self-understanding."³

The *SHEP* noted "that perhaps as many as 25% of all college students want nothing to do with religion or spirituality in any form. In addition, many Americans say that they have no religious affiliation -- the number doubled between 1990 and 2001 -- and undergraduates probably reflect that trend."⁴ For example, at Manhattan College, 71% of the Class of 2009 declared themselves as "Catholic" while the next largest group (17%) declared "no religion."

² W. Robert Connor, "The Right Time and Place for Big Questions," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 52, Iss 40, p. B8, June 9, 2006.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

(We believe many of that later group are, in fact, baptized Catholics.) In 1990, 83% declared themselves "Catholic" while 8% declared no religious affiliation.

While the average class of 30 students may contain about eight who are uninterested in catechesis and evangelization, the larger part of the class sees "religion" as a "good thing because it makes you feel like a better person" according to the *SHEP*. In short, enthusiastic students are looking for fidelity in their teachers as they search for opportunities to discuss in person, rather than in some chat room, the meaning and purpose of life.

Our students are caught in a precarious bind. They find themselves beyond the years of childhood and, at times, fear they will never achieve what they imagine to be adulthood. During this transition period many young people understand life as a journey in which they discover new horizons of identity. They often search for meaning with the intensity of pilgrims and proclaim their newfound message with the enthusiasm of prophets. For them this period of life is understood in terms of endless possibilities. It is a time stimulated by growth, encouraged by hope and headed toward happiness.⁵

With so much personal energy exploding in all directions, this can be a teacher's nightmare. However, for a Lasallian educator, this is an opportunity for more-effective teaching. In the consciousness of many students, their relationship with God is now front-and-center and with this awareness comes some mighty "big questions." Of course, "Who am I?" is often the biggest of the big questions followed quickly by "What am I going to do with my life?" Yet, with proper questioning we can help students discover some powerful hints as they come to answer these perpetual issues for themselves. The students are on a quest: to discover the person God intended him or her to be. The "quest" is formed by the *questions*. Today the

⁵ Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1984), 97-99.

questions of catechesis and evangelization concern "personal and civic morality, the existence and nature of radical evil, the perennial tug of war between scientific and religious worldviews, and the relationship between wealth and happiness, and between power and justice, in both national and international affairs."⁶

When students are asked to formulate their own "big questions" they provided examples like, "What are my values? Is there such a thing as evil? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand suffering and death?" In other words, they asked questions of meaning and value that traditionally have been central to the message of Jesus Christ.⁷

But how many of our students enthusiastically view these questions as an opportunity for spiritual growth that will accompany them on the journey to adulthood? From this question a challenge emerges for young men and women to accept responsibility for their own spiritual growth. The challenge for them is to become aware of God's action in their lives as they reach crossroads in personal development. Crossroads are times of decision and direction that lead people toward or away from wholeness. These are demanding periods of struggle and pain, usually accompanied by rewarding opportunities for self-discovery and learning.⁸

At these crossroads many of our students are conscious of God at work in moments perceived as positive and growthful, but they find it difficult to articulate the presence of God in times of ambiguity and defeat. Their lives are often based on the mistaken notion that all life should be on the upswing. Their theology is a theology of resurrection more than of the cross.

⁶ Connor, B9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Wayne Proudfoot, Religious Experience (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 231.

Since both elements are integral to Christian evangelization, there may be a danger in this one-sided approach among the young. Without the cross, growth in spirituality is able to retain its thrust only by repressing the negative side of life. In the long run, repression could lead to an eruption of resentment and frustration. Such a reaction poses a challenge for today's Lasallian educators in the formation of young people as they respond to the touch of God in times of restlessness and times of peace.⁹

Lasallian educators participate in the process of catechesis and evangelization by helping students to highlight their personal experiences of God in faith. One of our key roles, then, is to facilitate the dialogue between the student and God, slowly enabling students to discover God's intimate touch in their lives. In order to help students to become more aware of God's self-communication in their life, the educator who has experienced the touch of God needs to help God touch others. We need to enjoy God's touch. It is more significant than the touch of any human being. It is the touch of life itself. It is nothing less than the gift of enthusiasm.

This enthusiasm leads to a hunger or thirst for effective catechesis and for a vibrant evangelization. It is a search for God. As students struggle with the questions that lead to God, how do we train Lasallian educators to enter into this process? Where does common worship and private prayer enter into the formation process of young people? How can we address students' interest in and engagement with religion and spiritual topics?

As Lasallian educators remain faithful to the process they do not need answers to every question; rather, their role is to help students think for themselves. It is less a question of expertise and more a dynamic of feeling comfortable enough to raise the issues in a civil manner and to encourage open discussion. Proper catechesis is never a matter of brainwashing; it is

⁹ William J. Bausch, Storytelling Imagination and Faith (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 105-116.

always a matter of dealing sensitively to the "big questions" of young people as they take responsibility for shaping their own lives.

Enthusiastic students and faithful educators care about real questions and, as a result, are passionate about them. There are some answers that give us something very solid on which to ground our lives. But often answers give birth to far many more questions. So we go looking for more adequate answers and satisfying answers to harder and harder questions. The author Susan Sontag once said, "The only interesting answers are those that destroy the questions." Perhaps our response is "And it is the task of scriptural questions to destroy incomplete answers."

And that is the basis of catechesis: there are questions, lots of questions. And it is good to live in the question. A pat answer is closed, it is finished; that's it. It goes nowhere and leaves little room for hope. A question, a mystery, opens the space for us. It is full of possibility. It gives hope of life and ever more abundant life. Our faith, solid as it might be, is full of questions. And therefore full of life and hope.¹⁰

As previously noted, in the word "question" is yet another word "quest." We are on a quest. As Lasallian educators our quest is a common mission to provide a Christian education to young people and we carry out this quest "together and by association." What questions are we hearing today that shape our quest? As we live in the questions, a certain vitality shapes our daily lives. Faithful teachers challenge students to live with the questions asked by scripture.

No two contributors in this symposium read the same paper. Each brings something of himself or herself to the paper. It is not that some understand better -- we all understand differently. What matters is that we all understand the dynamics of a paper and, in turn, we

¹⁰M. Basil Pennington, Living in the Question: Meditations in the Style of Lectio Divina (Harrisburg, PA: Continuum International Publishing, 2000), 145.

select "truths" to shape our stories. What matters is that we all search for some "hard-won truths" in stories. There is no argument: stories are powerful. Stories always ask more questions than they answer. Good stories communicate truth, but not always the whole truth. Remembering the story of Jesus shapes our stories to be faithful and hopeful. Stories of hope truly believe that our best years are still ahead of us and our story expands to the degree that we can dream. They are a journey and a joining. In a tale we meet new places, new people, new ideas. And they become our places, our people, and our ideas.

Stories are layered. Some layers are sad, while others are hopeful. However, sacrifice is a part of every story. It's supposed to be. It's not something to regret. It's something to aspire to. To grow and to love and to age and to die, and to finally have your questions answered -- why you lived and what you lived for -- is to share a part of the secret of heaven: that each affects the other and the other affects the next, and the world is full of stories but the stories are all one.¹¹

Our stories are layered. No story sits by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners and sometimes they cover one another almost completely. Take one story and it can be viewed from two different angles. No story is a waste.¹² The only time we waste is the time we spend thinking we are alone in our story. Stories that happened before you were born still affect you. People who came before your time affect you as well. Everyday we move through places that would never have been if not for those who came before us. We stand on the shoulders of giants. Our stories, and all our accomplishments, sit atop the stories of our mothers and fathers, our families, our friends, our Lasallian colleagues, story upon story. We know there are many stories yet we also know that there is actually only one story told by one Storyteller.

¹¹ Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven (New York: Hyperion Books, 2003), 12.

¹² Ibid.

Finally, stories are a mystery, giving out clues to open the locked doors of self. We develop our wisdom from our stories. In short, you author your life story. As a Lasallian educator, how do you share your story? One Freudian psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim spoke of tales as lending permission to the listeners. He said that folk stories were not only a record of emotions carried through centuries but were actually part of a child's rehearsals for adult life. They also served adults to re-work the present. The fairy tale, says Bettelheim, "takes (adult) anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life, and the fear of death."¹³ In this view, stories are homeopathic, the storyteller a healer.

Our students need healing as they experience the growing pains of moving from childhood through adolescence into adulthood. Unfortunately, there are too many messages out there in the media that give false directions and point to empty promises. Our young people are not worthless. They have value beyond price. As Lasallian educators we are the men and women who can help dispel fear and point young people to life. We can cooperate with a healing God who is generous with giving out the clues and who desires nothing less than the fullness of each person. It is our challenge at the start of the 21st-century. It is the foundational element of our catechesis and evangelization: enthusiasm embraced by fidelity. It is gift that we can offer young people as we live the words of Wisdom which have survived the centuries:

My child, when you come to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for trials.
Be sincere of heart and steadfast,
undisturbed in time of adversity.
Cling to God, forsake God not;
thus will your future be great.
Accept whatever befalls you,
in crushing misfortune be patient;
For in fire gold is tested,

¹³ Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 132.

