

**White Paper for St. Mary's Press**

**The Experience of the Student in Teaching Religion**

**The Lasallian mission is to offer a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor. This paper will illustrate the central role student experience holds in the drama of Christian education. Some of the guiding thoughts of St. La Salle for Christian education will be noted along with some insights of the Bishops of the United States regarding the catechetical enterprise.**

**The bishops of the United States remind us that, “Human experience is a constituent element in catechesis.”(National Directory for Catechesis #29, A) The Lasallian tradition situates the life of the young at the center of catechesis, “Almost by instinct the living tradition of the Institute has been careful to integrate faith in Jesus Christ with the way young people lead their daily lives.” (A Declaration of the 39<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, Chapter VII, #2) Pope John Paul II has explained the way the catechist establishes God’s reign is “to witnesses to the living truth of**

**the Gospel.” It is by helping the young people we teach to see their experience, their humanity, their daily lives in the light of Christ’s incarnation that we witness to the living truth of the Gospel, that we help to uncover in their lives the holy presence of God.**

**This method of teaching is validated in the results observed in the lives of the students. Accompany me into one religion class that was invited to pray, reflect and respond to the question, “What has been a wake up call in your life?” A senior boy responded in this way, “A wake up call for me was my grandmother’s trip to the hospital. She had been sick two times before and couldn’t return home right away. I began to realize that without her my mother would struggle to put food on the table for my brother and me. So I pray every night and do realize, if this society can awaken from the color issue, about how people who are not white get treated unfairly, then we will be a better society.”**

**The experience of this young man became an invitation for the whole class to reflect on God’s presence in their lives. Faith in Christ’s love was expressed in the young man’s prayer for his grandmother. His classmates could immediately recognize similarities and differences in**

**his circumstances and their own. His love for his mother and grandmother was an experience shared by many in the class, his life on the edge may not have been familiar to most of his classmates. His experience of racism was an eye opener for many in the class.**

**By sharing his experience this young man experienced the affirmation of his classmates, he experienced Christian community. His story revealed many gospel values to his classmates. The importance and power of prayer is obvious. His love for his grandmother became an invitation for the members of the class to empathize with him and to reflect on love or lack of it within their own families. Christ's life as an itinerant Galilean preacher who ate and drank with outcasts and called the poor blessed is easily related to the young man's story. The evil of racism alluded to in the story challenged the whole class to reflect on the teaching of Jesus that all people are God's children no matter race, nationality or place of origin.**

**A different kind of epiphany is present in the peak experience of a 15-year-old girl at the end of a school year. "One of the most important**

**things that I learned this year was the beauty of nature and one's surroundings. I gradually accepted it into my life several times a week. I would deliberately stroll down the street breathing in the air, listening to the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves and watching the canopy of trees. Problems seemed to fade away as I took in my surroundings. I became more vital and alive. I experienced this great feeling and one not often present in my life. I also felt a sense of peace and gratitude to God."**

**What a lesson on prayer and resisting the violence of activity that fills the culture in which we live. Slowing down, paying attention to the present, being alert to what is happening in the now results in peace and gratitude to God. This young girl's experience of God's presence through nature evokes the words of the psalmist in psalm104. Who can't see in her wonder and gratitude the appreciation of Jesus for the natural world and his use of scenes from nature to teach about the reign of God. The young girl's appreciation of the trees, leaves and clean air prepares her to follow the teaching of the bishops of the United States to protect God's earth from the decreation that is now taking place in so many forms.**

**The National Directory for Catechetics states, “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ.” (#55) A student’s journal is a window into her self-understanding. The story shared by a 17-year-old high school senior illustrates the importance of the student’s personal experience for developing intimacy with Jesus.**

**Ruby said she was facing a dilemma. Ruby’ best friend Mary was in the first year of college and was pregnant. Because her father had left them years earlier, Mary lived with her mother. Her mother had become pregnant as a teenager and told Mary that this should never happen to her or she would have to leave home and find a place to live. Ruby was 100% against abortion and everyone knew it. But, her best friend saw no other alternative and asked Ruby to accompany her to the abortion clinic. Ruby loved her friend who was alone and frightened, but Ruby was also opposed to abortion. What could she do?**

**Ruby was in tears when she presented her dilemma to one of her teachers. She was helped by the teacher to reflect on her beliefs, to ask what Jesus would do, to seek responsible guidance, to pray and ask for God’s help. Through the process Ruby came to make her own decision**

**aided by a sense of Christ's presence with her in her struggle. It was by sharing her experience that Ruby was supported in her efforts to reflect and to pray. To provide guidance to a person in need is a work of mercy expected of the Church. This Ruby experienced. The young girl learned that God sometimes expects us to struggle with what we believe, to seek guidance, to pray and to follow our conscience. Through experience, Ruby knows, when she seeks to do God's will, Christ struggles with her.**

**The Catechism of the Catholic Church says this about catechesis, "At the heart of the catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of the Father...who suffered and died for us, and who now after rising, is living with us forever." (Catechism of the Catholic Church #426) The suffering Christ is revealed in the story of another young man.**

**Matthew sorrowfully answered a question about his greatest suffering. "I'm still suffering. I walked out of my apartment onto the sidewalk to discover one of my friends lying in a puddle of his own blood." This young man was still held in the grasp of the tragedy when he shared it**

**with his classmates. By sharing his experience the student discovered the freedom that comes from sharing a deep pain with people you trust. The class became church for the young man. The student was able to express painful emotions and to seek the help he needed but could not provide for himself. He was also able to receive guidance from both a teacher and from a priest.**

**This experience might find no place in the traditional religious education curriculum but without having the opportunity to reflect upon it with people of faith, who were caring and healing, the person of Jesus would remain in shadow before a life changing event for this young man.**

**In the Catholic Church the sacramental principle means that God is present in everyday, in the visible, in the ordinary life in the world. The experience of a 17 year-old boy named Michael illustrates this well. The class was looking at the hungers of the human heart and ways the hungers are satisfied. One conclusion of the class was that our longings are holy and can lead us to God. This is an excerpt from his journal.**

While he was driving home on a recent, late afternoon, Michael was struck by the magnificence of the sunset. “The clouds were like mountains all pink underneath with a soft blue and white on top. The sun’s gold was softened by the first traces of dusk. It hung like a medallion, gold and shimmering with life. I wanted to stop and blow the car’s horn so people would notice the beauty and grandeur God offered to them.” The heart of Michael hungered for beauty and through his sharing his experience Michael could describe the beauty of creation that is one of God’s passageways into the human heart.

Many Lasallian schools offer Christian service programs. Just a few quotations that students shared in journals from the class will illustrate the importance of personal experience for meeting and knowing Christ. “Not only is poverty a call to Christians to help, but it is our destiny as God’s children.” “There is a certain peacefulness I get every Wednesday, when I leave the Franciscan Missionaries, (This is a day care program for the elderly.) is unlike anything I have ever experienced before.” “I was faced with discovering the truth about myself through Christian Service and to find God and Jesus in my brothers and sisters whom I served. Before Christian Service I was



**afraid to think of myself as a Christian. I'm not afraid to think that any more."**

**St. La Salle writes, "To touch the hearts of your students and to inspire them with the Christian Spirit is the greatest miracle you can perform and one God expects of you." As Lasallian educators our mission is part of the *Church's work in spreading the Gospel. (The Rule, Article 11)* As Christian educators we are called to help the young to see God is at work in their humanity. Each day God dons the disguise of human flesh and acts through human personality to confront our faith and to affirm Christ is present now, takes on human form in the sufferings and joys of the young people we teach. May we help them to live in the light of faith in the Gospel, to know God's holy presence resides within their hearts and minds and imaginations and longings. May we help our students to uncover in their ordinary experiences that Jesus lives in their hearts, forever.**