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Mapping the Mission

Faith Development Theory

*When the student is ready,
the teacher will appear.*

—Chinese Proverb

As far as I know, William Glasser, author of *The Quality School*, has never written anything specifically on teaching Religion. His recipe for quality education, however, is very much applicable and entirely amenable to Religious Education.

Glasser's passion is to help schools become, in the promotional words of my own diocese, places "where students love to learn and learn to love." If Religion class is to be a favourite class for youth, they need to include it in what Glasser calls their "quality world." Simply put, the "quality world" is that part of a student's brain where all the things they like are stored.

Every parent has experienced the immediate reaction of their teenager when a certain thing, event, place or person is mentioned.

"Do you want to play soccer this season?" a parent asks.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I don't like soccer!"

"Since when do you not like soccer?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to visit Grandma this weekend?"

"Sounds good!"

"Are you going to the school dance, church youth group, Mass, summer camp? Would you like to work at your uncle's shop, play golf with your cousin, visit the museum, enroll in theatre class, take guitar lessons, go on the youth retreat ...?"

When teens are asked these questions, what will always register first is an emotion, pleasant or painful. Parents will try to get reasons for why a teen feels a certain way, but will often encounter resistance with the classic teen response: "I don't know!" For the most part, this is true. There may be multiple reasons why they do or do not want to do something, and often they do not know what these reasons actually are. What they do know is *how they feel*. According to Glasser, the reason you like something is because over time you have consistently experienced this event or activity meeting your basic human needs. When this happens, a student moves this event into a part of their memory called "my quality world." The thought of that activity automatically evokes a pleasant emotional response.

According to Glasser, a young person's needs include

- *Belonging* – feeling connected and accepted in community
- *Empowerment* – being significant and needed
- *Fun* – joy, laughter, humour
- *Love* – positive affirmation and respect
- *Freedom* – respect for expression of thoughts and ideas.

Many Religion teachers get caught up with such goals as completing the curriculum, keeping up with the other Religion teacher, satisfying the expectations of the department head, or making sure the students are prepared for the upcoming Religion test. What they need to put at the forefront of all these concerns is making sure that Religion class is in the students' quality world.

This will happen only if the students' needs are being met in Religion class. What good is any other goal if the students do not actually like Religion class?

It might be argued that teens can still learn in a class they dislike. This is true in university, and it may be true in other subjects in high school, but it is not true in the high school Religion class. Or, put another way, students learn to dislike Religion in a Religion class they dislike.

Glasser has a striking way of communicating this concept to adults. When speaking to an adult audience, he calls a number of high school students to the stage and asks them this question: "Where in high school do you feel important?"

This question always seems to the students to come from outer space; they look at me as if I had asked something ridiculous. Even for the very good students, who are the group usually selected to be interviewed, feeling important (powerful) in school is an experience that few seem to think relates to them.

However, when I persist, most students tell me that they feel important in their extracurricular activities: sports, music and drama are most frequently mentioned ... When asked why this is so, they say that in the extracurricular situation, where they *work together* as a group or on a team, they work harder and accomplish more because they *help each other* and have more *fun*. They also emphasize that they are both *more comfortable* and *less bored* in these situations because it is accepted that they *socialize* while they work¹⁵ (italics mine)

Look at the words that stand out in the students' "quality world" and how they relate to the students' need for belonging, empowerment, fun, love and freedom. Teens feel important when they feel needed. They see more meaning in the class when they discover that the class is more meaningful because they are in it. When they feel the freedom to explore who they are and who others are, they not only find it fun but their laughter reflects a deep sense of belonging, joy and a sense of being loved. Then, not only will Religion class be in their "quality world," but you, the teacher, will also be.

How do students describe a “good teacher”? Glasser writes:

Students tell me that a good teacher is deeply interested in the students and in the material being taught. They also say that such a teacher frequently conducts class discussions and does not lecture very much. Almost all of them say that a good teacher relates to them on their level; the teacher does not place herself above them, and they are comfortable talking to her Students also tell me that they appreciate teachers who make an effort to be entertaining.¹⁶

Glasser may not know it, but what he advocates is the winning formula for teaching teens Religion. My own list, compiled from student evaluations, both oral and written, confirms Glasser’s observations. This is what students say about why they like Religion class, why it is part of their quality world:

- I learned so much about myself in Religion class.
- You always believed in me, you gave me hope.
- Your classes were fun.
- You made me feel like a person.
- I loved the discussions.
- You were always welcoming.
- Your classes were different from other classes.
- You make Religion make sense.

And the mother of all compliments, the ultimate teacher gratification:

- Thank you for putting up with us.

This should be our mission statement: *Adulescentias toleramus* (We put up with teens).

The unique opportunity we have in Religion class to attend to the deeper needs of teens is appreciated far more than we realize. Sometimes we receive confirmation that we are on the right track – as in the following letter from a parent:

Dear Mr. Brock,

We thought you would like to know how much Tracy enjoyed her Religion class. She’s usually quiet at the supper table except for the

days she had your class. She always wanted to discuss that day’s lesson with us. We asked her why she enjoyed the class so much and she said it was the only class that she could discuss her thoughts, opinions, concerns, etc. Thanks so much for all your hard work, care and concern. Have an awesome summer.

Mr. and Mrs. R.

Some teachers may balk at the above, protesting that life is not a bowl of cherries and it takes hard work and serious effort to grasp the theological concepts in Religion class that will protect a student’s faith life in the years to come. I believe in quality work, hard work, work that students take pride in. I believe, however, that quality work is best achieved in a Religion class that is at the core of a student’s quality world. Students work harder and value the work they do when Religion is a class they value.

In all the years I have taught Religion, the pedagogical tools that have helped me the most in making Religion a favourite class (meeting students’ needs) are what religious educators call Faith Development Theory and Learning Process Theory. In this chapter, I will explain the four stages of faith development. In chapters 4 and 5, I will explain the learning process and what it looks like in your day-to-day lesson plan. Simply put, an understanding of faith development and the learning process helps teachers develop a teaching strategy that takes its cue from the way teens learn and is directed at meeting their needs. This way, Religion class will be in a student’s quality world – a favourite class.

The four stages of faith development

Mark Twain said, “When I was thirteen I couldn’t believe how ignorant my father was. When I turned 20 I was amazed to see how much he had learned in seven years.” When the student is ready, teachers and fathers and mothers appear. The proactive teacher knows what the student is ready for, and then appears. One helpful tool for discerning the faith readiness of adolescents is faith development theory.

The researcher most associated with stages-of-faith theory is James Fowler, but I have found the four stages described by John Westerhoff helpful for situating teen catechesis in a useful context. Westerhoff uses the rings of a tree as a metaphor for faith development. A tree acquires one ring at a time in a slow and gradual process. The addition of each ring of a tree does not eliminate the previous rings.

Each stage is roughly associated with the following age group:

- Pre-born, newborn and primary school.....
Experienced Faith
(Childhood nurturing)
- Elementary school.....
Affiliative Faith
(The need to belong)
- Adolescence: teen and young adult
Searching Faith
(The search for meaning)
- Adulthood.....
Owned Faith
(My own faith story)¹⁷

Experienced Faith: Stage 1

... a universal image of trust in painting and sculpture is a child nursing at its mother's breast. Not only will the child decide that it can trust the world, but it will also decide that it can trust itself, because it sees that its needs (and therefore its being) bring a good response. It's as if the child says, "Something good happens when I express my needs. My needs must be good. I must be good."¹⁸

We don't think of ourselves teaching faith to newborns, but in fact we are involved in Religious Education even before that. Religious Education begins in the womb. Albert Einstein's celebrated profession of faith, "The universe is friendly," is "picked up" by the unborn child in the voices and sounds she hears, and in myriad ways we may never fully understand. We learn that the "universe is friendly" in the

smiling, adoring eyes of our parents, in their secure embrace and in the nurturing we receive. We learn that life is good, I'm good, God is good – or we learn otherwise. The father you see in the mall throwing his little child in the air and catching her, to the child's great delight: that is "experienced faith."

In his book *Scattered Minds*, Dr. Gabor Maté includes a section about his own early childhood. Born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1944, during the time of the Nazi occupation, Gabi was the first child of Jewish parents. He writes:

Two days after the German occupation, my mother called the pediatrician. "Would you come to see Gabi?" she requested. "He has been crying almost without stop since yesterday morning."

"I'll come, of course," the doctor replied, "but I should tell you: all my Jewish babies are crying."

Now, what did Jewish infants know of Nazis, World War II, racism, genocide? What they knew – or rather, absorbed – was their parent's anxiety. They drank it in with their mother's milk, heard it in their father's voices, felt it in the tense arms and bodies that held them close. They inhaled fear, ingested sorrow. Yet were they not loved? No less than children anywhere. If in the photograph the love may be seen in my mother's face, her fear and worry are reflected in mine.¹⁹

Years later, as an accomplished physician and author, Dr. Maté was looking at the diagnosis for Attention Deficit Disorder when he suddenly realized – that's me! His book *Scattered Minds* is subtitled *A New Look at the Origin and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder*. What makes it especially engaging, besides the obvious scholarship, is that it is written by an "insider." In technical language, Dr. Maté reveals how the wiring of the brain is influenced by the emotional environment in which the child is conceived.

Experienced Faith reminds us that the spiritual journey began long before our students entered our classroom, whether they consider themselves "religious" or not. A striking illustration of the influence of child rearing on spiritual development is cited by Sheila Fabricant,

co-author with Dennis and Matthew Linn of *Healing the Eight Stages of Life*. In the book, Sheila tells the story of how, as a theology student in Europe, she was reading a number of books by East European theologians, all born in the early 1900s. In each of the books, she sensed an image of God as remote and unapproachable. Human life seemed to be a long search to find God. The theologians seemed to be saying that only rarely would we actually feel God near us. Mostly we were to just walk in darkness and summon the will to believe that God is out there – somewhere, hearing our cry.

This approach disturbed Sheila, because it was not her experience. She had always experienced God as warm and approachable, rather like her grandfather. Searching for an answer, she eventually asked a woman friend who was married to a German scripture scholar. The friend told Sheila that, at the time these theologians were raised in that part of Europe, parents did not pick up or hold their babies when they cried. The parents believed this was the best way to develop self-discipline in their children. As Sheila reflected on this point she thought, "I wonder if these theologians who are crying out to a distant God are really crying out to a mother and father who never picked them up or held them."²⁰ Their faith life patterned their earliest experience of being parented. Particularly in early childhood, our sense of God is synonymous with the sense we have of our parents. I say "sense" because it cannot yet be articulated or formulated; it is just "experienced faith." The point is this: in order for people to grow in the love of God, they must have a God-like experience upon which their love of God grows. The natural place for this to happen is in the family.

In practical terms, this means that the student in your class who has a close bond with his or her parents will be more receptive to Religious Education. (More on this in Chapter 7.) The student who has a broken or damaged bond may have some issues with religion. It may be protested that "faith is a gift of God, and God cannot be curtailed." True, the grace of faith is a free gift, but grace acts on a person according to that person's nature. A damaged parental bond must eventually be grieved, and grieving is not a process many people readily enter. Most

adolescents are not anywhere near the point of honestly assessing the pain a strained parental bond has caused. Instead, and unfortunately, their pain often comes out as projection in the form of anger and rejection of a particular peer (someone to pick on and bully), or a rejection of authority (including God and the "business of God" – Religion class). In time, when the adolescent identity is stronger, the real pain can be faced, the grieving begun and the healing commenced. A Religion teacher who understands this process will not be so ready to dismiss a student as the agnostic nuisance in the class.

Affiliative Faith: Stage 2

To force a strong spirituality on children before they are ready is unnatural and can kill a child's interest in religion and even in God So many of my friends in their excessive zeal to arouse their children's spiritual lives saturated them with religious activities. When the children became adolescents, they couldn't stand religion and went to church only after horrendous fights.²¹

I grew up in the north Bronx. One Saturday in mid-March when I was of mid-elementary school age, I heard the sound of bagpipes close to the schoolyard where I was playing. Exploring, I soon discovered a parade forming on Riverdale Avenue. It must have been on or near St. Patrick's Day. Although the parade was just a miniature version of the one in downtown Manhattan, it was big to me. I joined the parade and marched to the drone of bagpipes, feeling a sense of connection to something bigger than my family – a sense of being Irish (the Patrick part), and Catholic (the Saint part). I was Irish-Catholic, and where the Irish left off and the Catholic started, or the Catholic ended and the Irish began, I could never tell you. It didn't matter – *I belonged*.

Why does this event stand out in my memory? Why are the emotions experienced that day so easily recalled? No friend accompanied me in that parade; my brothers and sisters were not present. I marched alone, but not lonely – I felt affiliated.

Affiliative Faith is about belonging, more than believing. It is about being socialized into a religious group and community. We're Catholic, Pentecostal, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, Presbyterian, Anglican, Mormon, Muslim. If asked why you are a Catholic, you might respond, because we go to St. Mary's Church. We are Catholic because we do Catholic things. We go to church on Sunday, say grace before meals, have a crucifix on our wall, we even had Father Flynn over for dinner – that's why we're Catholic.

After every youth retreat, the students fill out an evaluation form. When they evaluate the part of the retreat when we celebrate Reconciliation and Eucharist, I sometimes hear a clear Affiliative Faith response: "We have to have Mass, because we are a Catholic school." This is true, but not the deeper truth. We don't have Mass because we are Catholic; we are Catholic because we have Mass. This would make little sense to someone in the Affiliative Faith stage.

Affiliation is bonding with the tribe, the group, the community and the great tradition and story of our Church. Routine (ritual) is important. "We always do it that way. We say Ah-men not Ay-men."

Students who have the Affiliative Faith ring in their tree connect more easily with what you are doing in Religion class. Teens who don't have Affiliative Faith sometimes let you know that "I'm not religious." I sometimes say, "Do you believe in Love?"

"Yes!"

"Well, then, you are religious because the Bible says God is Love."

What they really mean when they say "I'm not religious" is "I'm not marching in the same parade as you."

On the positive side, Affiliative Faith is natural; faith always inculturates itself for a people. The body of faith dresses itself in the songs, traditions, rituals and expressions of the ethnic community. Attend a Portuguese, Polish, Filipino or Italian religious festival, and you will see affiliation celebrated.

On the negative side, Affiliative Faith can become empty if it is just an auxiliary attribute of my ethnic group (cultural Catholics). It can even become hypocritical if the next ring in the tree of faith is not

eventually formed. In the movie *The Godfather*, the director intersperses scenes from an Italian baptism with the criminal activities of the mafia. One is left wondering, what kind of faith is this?

Affiliative Faith also entails a "first naïveté," a concept developed by theologian Paul Ricoeur (the "second naïveté" occurs in Stage 4). Belief in the faith story, handed on by significant adults, is unhampered by doubt and dissension. The questions of Affiliative Faith are attempts to put the pieces of the faith story puzzle together, not questions about the relevance or reliability of the puzzle itself. Knowing the story – what happens next and how it all fits together – is the primary need in Affiliative Faith. Children love stories.

Respecting the nature and limitations of each faith stage is critical. Attempting to accelerate a child's religious education can derail the process. Teaching Religion in a manner that exceeds a student's ability to engage hampers their natural religious imagination and sense of wonder. You can't force-feed Religion, just as you can't induce a plant to grow by pulling on its stem. You will uproot the person's genuine and natural interest in things spiritual. Running, playing, feeling the wind on your face, smelling the grass beneath your feet and having a sense of timelessness – this is spiritual. Childhood is spiritual immersion. Deprived of this immersion, we sever or strain the roots that will nourish our faith life in the years to come. Religion teachers can strain this faith development when, instead of working with the nature of the child, they try to advance them by exposure to "higher" expressions of religious life. As Conrad Baars has written,

Since the principle of spoiling is not limited to material objects, but extends also to the spiritual realm, excessive and premature exposure to things religious and spiritual will interfere with the development of his sense of wonder and faith.²²

The following story by Danny Dutton, a grade 3 student in Chula Vista, California, was sent to me through cyberspace. It is a fun and informative example of Affiliative Faith. Notice how Danny is putting the pieces of his faith story together. He wrote it for the homework question "Explain God."

Explanation of God

One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die, so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grownups, just babies. I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way he doesn't have to take up his valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that to mothers and fathers.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers and things, pray at times besides bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV. Because he hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in his ears, unless he has thought of a way to turn it off.

God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere which keeps him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting his time by going over your mom and dad's head asking for something they said you couldn't have.

Atheists are people who don't believe in God. I don't think there are any in Chula Vista. At least there aren't any who come to our church.

Jesus is God's son. He used to do all the hard work, like walking on water and performing miracles and trying to teach the people who didn't want to learn about God. They finally got tired of him preaching to them and they crucified him, but he was good and kind, like his father, and he told his father that they didn't know what they were doing and to forgive them and God said, OK.

His dad (God) appreciated everything that he had done and all his hard work on Earth so he told him he didn't have to go out on the road anymore. He could stay up in Heaven, so he did.

You should always go to Church on Sunday because it makes God happy, and if there's anybody you want to make happy, it's God! Don't skip Church to do something you think will be more fun like going to the beach. This is wrong and besides the sun doesn't come out at the beach until noon anyway.

If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It is good to know He's around you when you're scared, in the dark or when you can't swim and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids.

But you shouldn't just always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and he can take me back anytime he pleases.

And ... that's why I believe in God.²³

Searching Faith: Stage 3

There are two urgent needs for the young person ... The first is someone who understands and accepts him with all of his vacillation and ambivalence ... The second need is for a model ... he needs very badly to see someone who has passed through this wilderness, who has passed out of the darkness into the light ... He needs a model of faith.²⁴

A very loving and pious couple spoke with me during parent-teacher interviews. Their daughter, a very articulate and spiritually sensitive student, was in my Religion class. The parents said, "We don't know what is happening; we used to always read her parts of the Bible when she went to bed. Now she doesn't want us to do this. We don't know what is happening to her faith."

The Many Faith Faces of the Searching Teenager: Searching Faith – Choosing for Oneself

I assured them that her faith was not diminishing, just changing. Parents and teachers who have nurtured an Experienced and Affiliative Faith must now learn a new way to nurture. There is a saying that "God has no grandchildren." Our parents chose our faith for us when we were young; now we must choose it for ourselves. We must choose to be daughters and sons of God in our own right. The birth of Owned Faith (the fourth stage) begins with the labour pains of Searching Faith (the third stage). In order to choose something that has already been

given, you must place it at a psychic distance. From there you can begin to really see it, question it and eventually choose it for yourself. Searching Faith is not rejecting faith or rebelling against faith (though sometimes it will look like this). Searching Faith coincides with the adolescent ability to think in ideals, to think abstractly, to imagine, for instance, what "perfect" is – as in "perfect love." Hence, Searching Faith can be hypercritical of Church, which, alas, is not perfect. The old invitation is still valid. For those who refuse to join the Church because there are too many hypocrites in it, come and join anyway. We always have room for one more.

Searching Faith – Deconstruction Before Reconstruction

During the Affiliative Faith stage, children experience an increased sense of well-being and belonging as they put together the puzzle pieces of their life in the family and the Church. In the Affiliative stage, faith and family are the same, joined at the hip. The angst of the teenager, in Searching Faith, is the experience of having to take everything apart – faith and family – and then put it back together, in a new way. Taking things apart (deconstruction) is painful to youth. It's like a series of mini-deaths – naïveté dies, unquestioned obedience dies, unself-consciousness dies. Ask your young adolescents, "Be honest: how many of you sometimes want to go back to childhood?" They will all raise their hand. They miss it. This is where the Religion teacher becomes a grief counsellor. The death of unself-consciousness allows self-consciousness to emerge, with its attending insecurity. The death of naïveté and unquestioned docility allows a unique and personally confirmed faith and identity to emerge (construction). Now the Religion teacher becomes a midwife. Through it all, teenagers are searching for something that can make sense of all these changes – wisdom – and something that can keep them going – hope. For the teen, that "something" they are looking for is a "someone" – a model of faith, a mentor, a believer on the road ahead, a Religion teacher: you.

Searching Faith – A Necessary Stage

Those who study the stages (passages) of life note that we skip passages at our peril. Searching Faith is a necessary life process. The older adult who, by all appearances, has been a pillar of the Church and then suddenly abandons the faith completely is often testimony to a skipped stage. "Happily married" mother of three, a fixture at the church on Sunday, leaves a note for her stunned (soon to be ex-) husband revealing her six-month affair with a younger man. She's breaking out and rejecting what has been, up to now, a smooth, unruffled, model life. What should have occurred in adolescence went underground, only to emerge in later life in an extreme and malevolent form. Religion is not a way to escape life; religion is a way to enter into life more fully and to experience it abundantly, even the confusing, questioning, painful parts – the adolescent searching part.

A spiritual principle is at work here: nothing changes until it becomes what it is. Some adults see adolescence as a phase they would like to wish away. Yet it is spiritually unhealthy to bypass any stage of life. It has a way of returning to haunt you. All "hauntings" have to do with unfinished business. We need, in Stage 3, to help teenagers enter into the business of adolescence. If we don't, there is the possibility that, like the woman above, they will take their adolescence out on their spouse and children years later.

Adolescents need to be adolescents. It is not a disease to eradicate or a cold to wait out. Adolescence is not a phase to get through; it is a life stage to get into. It is not only a problem to be solved, it is a treasure to be unlocked. Helping adolescents to be what they are is the only sure step in helping them become what they will one day be.

High school Religion teachers should not just like teenagers, but delight in them. Their idealism, with all its naïveté, can be a balm for your spirit. Their openness can rub off a few layers of your cynicism. Their humour can subvert your tendency to take things too seriously as you get older. And, most delightful of all, their gratitude for what you teach them can warm your wintry soul. In this dollar-focused,

image-obsessed, frenetic culture, the summer breeze of adolescence can be a holy wind.

Searching Faith – Positive Questioning/Negative Questioning

Searching Faith entails questioning your faith. Questioning one's faith can be either a positive or negative endeavour. Positive questioning involves a sincere attempt to understand faith with the newly acquired cognitive abilities of adolescence. The dramatic growth and changes of adolescence are brought, as it were, to the altar of faith. Coming to God without our newly conceived questions is not coming to God as we are. Not questioning, in this sense, would entail a lack of faith. Teenagers need to chew on faith before they swallow it, because if they swallow it whole, not only will they be wondering what it is they ate, they will have a feeling of being force-fed. Questioning faith is the only way teens can make faith come alive within them. Their questions are much more than intellectual arguments, as Eva Frances Santos, age 15, explains: "When people say not to question God 'cause it's wrong, they're wrong. It never hurts to question something we don't know. All you are doing is wanting to know God in your heart."²⁵ Questioning faith is the way teens nourish their faith, and it is the job of the Religion teacher to make sure the faith of our youth does not die of starvation or malnutrition.

If a student is an honest doubter, then faith cannot permeate his or her heart until the doubts are given expression. The wise teacher facilitates that expression. When students articulate their dilemma as best they can, they are, in this very process, preparing themselves for the gift of faith. Being authentically oneself is the necessary precondition for the grace that awakens faith. St. Augustine said, "You would not be searching for God if you had not already found God."

When students say something in class that they know goes against the teaching of the Church, all their sensors are activated to detect one thing – your reaction. Depending on your reaction, these students will either put up more defences to the claims of faith, or begin dismantling the defences already in place. If we are going to influence teenagers

with our Catholic faith, we must love them into it, not argue them into it. As Bishop Fulton Sheen once said, "Win an argument, lose a soul." At the core of faith development is a radical acceptance of the person with all his or her doubts, questions and protests. People must come before faith as they are, or they can't come to faith at all. The Religion teacher must be, first and foremost, a minister of hospitality – come, just as you are.

Negative questioning, on the other hand, is questioning to prove the faith wrong. Students whose behaviour contravenes Church teaching are caught in a dilemma. They either question their behaviour in the light of faith, or they question the faith in the light of their behaviour. A student with a guilty conscience may engage in negative questioning.

It is sometimes difficult to know when a student is involved in positive questioning or negative questioning. The move from elementary school (Affiliative Faith) to high school (Searching Faith) is also the move from a mostly supportive playground community to the jungle of teenage cliques, popularity wars and stinging put-downs. A student's religious affiliation in elementary school garnered support, recognition and acceptance by others; now, in high school, it may prove a social liability. The siren sound of peer acceptance is very tempting, and some teenagers may begin to question their faith as a way of ditching it. Allegiance is now given to a new religion, a religion called Popularity. As the familiar religious maxim goes, if God seems far away, guess who moved?

Questioning is also a teen's way of saying, "Do you believe this, Mr. Brock?" They are testing you because it is their way of learning from you. We discover what teens learn by testing them. Teens discover what we believe by testing us. Their tests are harder.

This is where the adult critic mentioned earlier can raise a false alarm. The faith that has been so carefully cultivated and received with docility is now, seemingly, under attack. What are they doing in that Religion class? What we should be doing! Giving youth a place to search and question – a place to be real. Even saints went through it. Parts of St. Therese's *Story of a Soul* were edited by her superiors – probably

some of the dramatic Searching Faith parts. The world-revered Mother Teresa kept her faith alive, as a recent book and newspaper headlines attest, by expressing to her spiritual counsellor her painful sense of the distance of the God she longed for. It is necessary to express the struggles we have with faith in order to “keep the faith.”

Searching Faith – Evangechesis

Students in the Searching Faith stage appreciate teachers who guide them in the search. Teachers do this best not by showing students what they are looking for, but by helping them find it for themselves. The Latin word *educere*, the root of “education,” means to *draw forth*, not *put into* – as in “put this religious knowledge into their heads.” Teachers who do not understand the difference, though they have the best intentions, will be perceived by the students as close-minded. What teens really mean by this is “you did not validate and value my adolescent need to search myself.” It feels like this: they show up for an Easter egg hunt only to find you handing the eggs to them as they arrive at the door. They feel slighted, pre-empted. “Didn’t you believe that I could find the eggs? Thanks for taking the joy out of searching (the joy out of Religion class).”

The bewildered teacher will wonder, “Why do they not accept what I have to say?” The resentful teenager will silently fume, “Why don’t you respect me and like me?” The teacher will present what he thinks are reasonable explanations for his belief, to no avail. The student experiences this approach as preaching instead of teaching. Reasonableness is less valued than the feeling of personal worth, which the student has lost in Religion class. His friends and peers will soon join his cause. Anything the teacher says will be met with stubborn resistance. This class is quickly moving in the wrong direction. Up ahead looms a cliff.

The despondent teacher wonders, “How did this happen? I was just teaching the correct religious answers.” It happened because you were teaching teenagers, not adults. Being immersed in your own adulthood, you forgot what being adolescent is all about. You did what we are all

tempted to do on a daily basis: you assumed other people think and feel like you do. They don’t – especially teens. Adults and adolescents appear similar because they are both on a faith search. Understanding the crucial difference between the adult and adolescent faith search will help the aspiring teacher avoid a Religion class meltdown.

Adults search to deepen their faith.

Adolescents search to find faith.

Adults have discovered a measure of significance in their life, and are motivated by the values, principles and beliefs they have committed to.

Adolescents are searching for personal significance in their life and are often “on stage,” performing for the acclaim of those around them.

Experiencing one’s own significance is the first fruit of evangelization. “I am loved by God. I have a mission on this planet. God will be with me always on this mission – my life.”

Catechesis always follows evangelization, because the evangelized are seeking greater understanding of this faith they have accepted. The teacher who gives only religious answers in class is trying to catechize those who have not been evangelized. That is why these teachers experience resistance. The successful teacher has found the answer to this dilemma: “evangechesis.” When students experience their significance in the eyes of the teacher, they are not only empowered to ask religious questions, but become more open to receiving religious answers. The Religion teacher who can enable students to experience their own significance (evangelization) will also be lighting a fire of faith interest within them (catechesis). In short, the success of your Religion class will depend on whether the students feel significant in your class. They will feel this way if

- their contribution is solicited by you,
- their contribution is valued by you,
- they are taken seriously and respected, and
- they feel needed and wanted in the classroom.

It looks like this.

Adults have walked through the door of the house of faith, and are interested in exploring the many rooms “in my Father’s house.” Adolescents stand outside the house wondering why they should go in at all. The adult opens the window and shouts to the teen, “God loves you!” The teen still stands outside wondering, “Who is God, what is love, and who am I?” This is when the adult must make a decision. “Do I keep shouting out the window about the religious faith I found, or do I leave the house and go to where that young person is standing? Do I wait for them to come to me, or do I go to them?” The answer is found in both Christian theology and sound pedagogy. God did not wait for us to come, but sent his Son to where we were. The religious educator leaves the house to go to where the youth are.

This is what *evangechesis* means: we do not use teens to teach theology; we use theology to teach teens. We do not use teens to teach the curriculum; we use the curriculum to teach teens. Touching the hearts of young people must be our first priority, for until you touch their hearts, your lesson will be just another class the student has to get through, pass and forget. William O’Malley SJ said it succinctly in his insightful endorsement of Mitch Finley’s book *Let’s Begin with Prayer*. “Mitch Finley understands young people’s needs. He knows we have to go for their hearts (as Jesus did), not their heads, because their heads are just starting to work, while their hearts have been working overtime for a very long while.”²⁶ This is what I mean by *evangechesis*. We have to direct what we do in the classroom to their hearts while we engage their emerging intellect. *Evange* (heart) + *chesis* (head) = *Evangechesis*!

Searching Faith – Religion on the Bench

Becoming a “somebody” and achieving social success is the all-pervasive concern for teens. Teens themselves hardly notice how they have pushed faith, as they have previously known it, to the periphery of their lives. As one 16-year-old boy wrote,

God always plays a big role in my life because I try to base a lot of my decisions on his word. Right now, though, it doesn’t seem God is as important as he was when I was younger. The most important things to me are sports and my friends.

Bringing new adolescent questions to God will help this student regain a sense of God’s importance in his life. Failure to do so could put faith on the bench for the whole season.

Also, during the *Affiliative Faith* stage, the young person may have incorporated ideas about God that are simply not true – the most common being that if people have faith, they are spared trouble in life. For faith to grow, it will need to crack the shell of our delusions that we mistake for God’s truth.

Searching Faith – “Give me faith, Lord, but not yet!”

Searching Faith is experienced by the adolescent as a smorgasbord, with Christianity being one of the dishes served. The adolescent thinks, “It looks good, I’ll probably take it ... but let me see what else is being offered.” How can you commit to something unless you know, to some degree, what it is you are committing to? Every yes involves a no; yes to this means no to that. “More is gained,” said Helen Keller, “by the mistakes of those who honestly try to think for themselves than by the correct opinions of those who hold them simply because they have not heard the other side.”

A group of four young seminarians came to my Grade 10 Religion class one day. It was a Pentecost experience. It felt like a great wind had blown the door open, and four zealous apostles came sizzling in, all on fire for the Lord. My students were taken by storm; if it had been a platoon of US Marines, they would have felt no difference. These four guys were what my wife calls IYM – Intense Young Men. I thought they might be the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

They stood before my Grade 10 class, and, one by one, gave a telling witness to the power of God, the truth of the Catholic Church and the life we should be living. It was fast paced, airtight and concluded with a rousing call to commitment.

Then one of the IYM said, "Any questions?"

It sounded more like a challenge than an invitation. Silence and blank stares ensued. No one even moved. I think my students were afraid of doing anything that might make them appear a target for recruitment.

Finally, a boy in the last desk of the middle row slowly raised his hand and said, "What you guys are saying sounds really convincing ... But – uh, you forgot one thing."

"What's that?" said the seminarian.

"What if you are wrong?"

The class erupted in laughter. Searching Faith strikes again.

For high school youth, faith is like one of the many channels on TV. They may like what they see, but they want to know what else is on. Watch teens with a remote (especially boys): they keep surfing for fear they might be missing something better. Teens want to know what is around the corner. It's not that the grass is greener, it's just that it might be "new" grass, grass they haven't seen before, maybe purple grass – who knows, let's go see. To youth, every new idea is a revelation freshly minted; every new person is an interesting alien awaiting immigration into their world.

At the end of a school year, one of my students told me she was leaving the school.

"Why?" I asked.

"My mother wants me to go to public school," she said, "so I can experience the real world."

At what point do they say, "I've seen enough; faith is the answer"? At what point do they say, "Faith makes sense. I will build my life on it"? At what point do they say, "This is the real world"?

Most youth in high school are still trying to sort out the big identity questions:

- Am I OK?
- Am I lovable?
- What am I good at?

- What makes me special?
- Who is my friend?
- Why do I feel the way I do?

Considering all this, we can understand why making a faith commitment in high school is often postponed. Youth will still see themselves as affiliated to their faith, but that is not the same as the deeper, personal conversion of choosing faith for oneself – the call of the "new evangelization." For most young people, this commitment happens after high school, in their 20s, at the time they are making commitments in other areas, such as career and relationships.

When kids come back to visit their old high school, two or three years after graduation, the difference is striking. They are more focused, assured, congenial and inquisitive. They have taken charge of their lives. Even more surprising is the way they shake their heads, incredulously, as they recall who they were only two or three years before, or bemoan the current high school students as being so different from "when I was their age." They have become young men and women. It happens.

This is why ministry to youth after high school should be a priority in the Church. A young adult College and Career group meets every Monday night in my parish. That's when they not only ask the bigger questions, but delve into them more deeply.

It is not that high school kids can't make a commitment to faith. They can. But the person they commit is still in the process of becoming a self, and the commitment often rests on a weak foundation – like a high school romance. Teens find themselves acting Christian when in a Christian setting, acting otherwise when elsewhere. The chameleon lack of congruity in their lives prods them to search and question. The result is the formation of a life stance, a choice and a commitment. Praise God! They have come to the threshold of Owned Faith.

I was in university when it happened to me. I was sitting in a Theology class when it hit me. This makes sense, I thought. Not just about me, but about the world – the big picture. I discovered a theological outlook for all the big questions in life. This can be *my*

world view. I made this private commitment and the subsequent years have been a continual unpacking of the contents of that choice – that Catholic faith outlook. Some of our Grade 11 and 12 students might be ready for this commitment. We need always to call them to it. We cannot assume away the mysterious ways of the grace of God and the hidden readiness of young people.

Grace acts according to our nature. It may be in the nature of some youth to respond, and in the nature of others to be “not yet ready” during their high school years. This is something God knows, not the Religion teacher. You may have prepared the soil, or you may have planted the seed. It is no small task either way.

Owned Faith: Stage 4

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, wrote of an experience he had in downtown Louisville while on an errand for the monastery.

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.²⁷

If there are stages on the journey of faith, then Merton has described the homecoming. Waking from a dream of “separateness,” he experiences being one with everyone, everything. This is Owned Faith, not so much that I have faith, but that faith has me. In pursuing God, we are suddenly caught.

Can the adolescent have this faith? Can the teen say, “Walking down the hall, I was suddenly overwhelmed in the realization that I loved all the students, the upper grades, the lower grades, the geeks and nerds and losers and the ones who look at me funny and the tough guys who scare me and the snobs who ignore me and the ones who think they

are so cool and the jerks in Grade 9 and Jamie who has a big mouth and” That’s pushing it. Most adolescents accord only their friends full rights as persons, with everyone else being second-class citizens.

The goal of adolescence is to shore up the banks of an eroding character. It is to navigate the whitewater of peer expectations, and to arrive on the other side with an identity on board. It is to develop a new set of courtesy norms to ensure some measure of domestic tranquillity at the base camp called home. And it is to reflect on one’s emerging personhood in order to develop into a real person, not a role, copy or image of someone else. The progress made in developing one’s own personhood is directly proportionate to the progress that can be made in developing one’s relationship with God. Then, in the emerging reality of self and others, one’s understanding of the reality of God can take a new and heightened dimension. “Lord, that I may know myself, in order to know Thee,” wrote Saint Augustine. This is the challenge of adolescence and the necessary precursor to Owned Faith in adulthood (and I didn’t even mention hormones). To celebrate every step teens make along this way is so much more encouraging and respectful than to expect them to be where the adult has predetermined they should be. Owned Faith, in contrast, presupposes a stable identity and firm character. If you are going to give yourself to God, you have to make sure you have a self to give.

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said,

I know that I have to move from speaking about Jesus to letting him speak within me, from thinking about Jesus to letting him think within me, from acting for and with Jesus to letting him act through me. I know that the only way for me to see the world is to see it through his eyes.²⁸

This is Owned Faith, the movement from knowing about Jesus, to knowing Jesus, to becoming “not I but Christ living within me” (Galatians 2:20). St. Francis of Assisi said, “What I once loved I now disdain, what I now love, I once disdained.” Could he have been talking about being cool, being popular, wearing the right name brands

and being a real player with the ladies – a rough description of his adolescent life?

Owned Faith is the integration of your whole life with a committed outlook and direction. It happens when conscious faith permeates your subconscious, when controlled behaviour becomes habitual, when first nature becomes second nature and when there is no discrepancy between how you want people to see you and how you really are.

Owned Faith is also about “second naïveté” – a deeper openness to the mystical and the beyond. It is about the Chestertonian paradox: being sure and sensing mystery; committed to one’s own faith, but affirming the faith of the other; spiritually confident, yet relying on God’s grace; one integral person, but, in St. Paul’s words, being all things to all people.

What is Owned Faith? Look to the saints and the holy ones, for that is what Owned Faith looks like:

“I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”

—St. Thomas More (last words before his execution)

“Like anybody, I would like to live a very long life ... But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King (the night before he was assassinated)

“Why should we refuse to support a just cause just because the Communists support it?”

—Dorothy Day (often accused by other Catholics of being a Communist)

“I would like to take the place of Sergeant Gajowniczek.”

—St. Maximilian Kolbe (moments before being led to the starvation bunker)

“I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Christ. That is why, in preaching, I say ‘we lepers’; not ‘my brethren.’”

—Fr. Damien De Veuster (who died of leprosy)

“To me, to find God is to find the whole human family. No one can be disconnected from us.”

—Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ (author of *Dead Man Walking*)

In our consideration of the lives of the saints, and in our own lives, we do a disservice to youth if we omit the shadow side. Owned Faith is not surprised to discover that vices, like weeds, keep springing up in the garden of our virtue. You come, in adulthood, to an acceptance of your weakness, fearfulness, pettiness, need to control, temper, impatience and ego-centeredness. Acceptance is not giving in. Acceptance is not surrendering to your weakness. Acceptance entails a greater and final surrender to God *in your weakness*. These are the weeds and wheat brought to God at the end. We become tolerant, in Owned Faith, of the weeds and wheat in others, because we accept them in ourselves. In the words of St. Therese,

You are wrong, if you think your little Therese always marches along the way of virtue. She is weak, very weak; every day she experiences it afresh. But ... Jesus delights to teach her as he taught St. Paul, the science of glorying in one’s infirmities. That is a great grace, and I beg Jesus to teach it to you, for in it alone is found peace and rest for the soul.²⁹

Faith development – A mystery

“A sower went out to sow his seed” is how Jesus began his teaching on faith development. The sower sows generously, never knowing where the seed is going to fall. Teachers of teens need enough patience to accept that some seeds may lie dormant for quite some time.

Catechetical and youth ministry educator Michael Warren offers the following vignette for those engaged in the ministry of adolescent faith development.

A young man ... shocked his parents by announcing at age seventeen that he had “lost” his faith. Knowing his depth of reflectiveness, his parents, hurt though they were, decided to respect his decision. It took eight years of patient waiting before their son came to them and told them that he had recently been converted to Christian faith. The words of this young man to his parents impress me greatly: “I can tell you now that if you had not shown the respect for my

liberty of judgment that you did, I don't know if I should have ever found the Faith again."³⁰

St. Augustine should be the patron saint of faith development. His growth in faith was a reluctant letting go, a hesitant moving on. Looking back, he lamented the lateness of his love.

Yet it is the same with all of us.

We want to say, "Lord, you're finished with me, right?"

And the Lord keeps saying, "Not yet, not yet."

This is faith development: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ keeps coming again and again and again.

Faith development theory caused a rethinking of the question "How do teens learn Religion?" This chapter leads naturally to a discussion of the four stages of the learning process, the subject of the next two chapters.