

Pastoral Letter: A Commitment to Adolescent Catechesis: A Critical Stage of Lifelong Catechesis in the Diocese of Des Moines

Introduction

My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am writing to you at this time in my own name along with the unanimous concurrence of the Presbyteral Council as well as others who have been consulted to tell you of a centennial gift particularly aimed at our youth and their parents. As early as the fall of this year parishes in the Diocese of Des Moines will begin to offer a process of systematic growth in knowledge of the Catholic faith coupled with comprehensive youth ministry for our youth in grades nine through twelve. While many have been providing excellent opportunities for our high school youth to continue to grow in faith, it is important that all of our young people are grounded in knowledge of our faith –catechesis- and given an opportunity where they can grow in their expression of that faith -youth ministry-.

I am confident these proposed new directions will be beacons for our young people as they appropriate the faith. The diocesan offices of Catechetical Services, Evangelization and Adult Faith Formation and Youth Ministry, in addition to an ad hoc committee on Adolescent Catechesis have been working for nearly eighteen months, reviewing the state of high school catechesis and parish youth ministry in the diocese. They have been digesting the findings from many national surveys and research projects, including the *National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis*, which was cosponsored by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, the National Catholic Educational Association and the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership.

Status of Catechesis for Youth Ministry

For some time now, bishops throughout the country have been concerned with the state of adolescent catechesis. At the November 2007 meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops a document entitled "*A Framework for Adolescent Catechesis*" was approved. This document details what a four-year process of education in the Catholic Tradition would look like. The *Framework* has been designed for both Catholic high schools and parish catechetical programs for adolescents. It serves as a guide for diocesan offices as they plan for the on-going growth in faith of our young people as well as a gauge for those who publish materials for use in catechetical programs in schools and parishes. The eight semesters highlighted in the *Framework* are well developed by two publishers which have been approved for use in the Diocese of Des Moines for the faith formation programs of our high school students who attend public schools; *Call to Discipleship*, published by Harcourt-Our Sunday Visitor in Huntington, Indiana, and *Lifeteen*, published by Lifeteen in Phoenix, Arizona.

In recent years we have short changed our adolescents with regard to faith formation. The *National Study on Youth in Religion* published in 2004 tells us that 86% of our youth attend public high schools while 9% are enrolled in Catholic schools. Only 34% of high school youth attend any kind of religious education and a mere 24% are involved in any kind of youth group. The study also reveals that 74% of all Catholic youth are either "very" or "somewhat" interested in learning more about religion. While we can draw hope from that 74% we need to also realize that 80% of high school youth have never been involved in a study or prayer group; 81% have never participated in a pilgrimage or procession; 75% have never experienced a mission trip and 61% have never attended a retreat. These numbers reveal a vacuum in our efforts to engage in *lifelong formation in faith* since we seem to have neglected our high school youth. We have a moral responsibility to provide the best faith foundation possible for our young people.

Evangelization and Our Culture

Evangelization is critical at this time. Making Jesus Christ known and loved in our time by choosing to live the gospel in each moment is a tremendous task. Moreover, it is not just ourselves that need to be evangelized, but our culture as well. In our society there are many things that take us away from time with God and prevent us from learning more about faith and Church. For our young people, sports and work often take them away from the domestic church, the home and from the parish community as well.

Technology can pull our young people further away from forming meaningful relationships with their family members, peers, and other caring adults. The use of alcohol, illegal drugs and illicit sex tears down the very fiber of the human spirit and leaves the person empty of hope, joy and personal fulfillment. Our culture needs to be infused with the presence of God; we need to reclaim our families, our Sabbath and those relationships that feed our souls. When we are fed, our youth are fed and our culture is capable of being transformed. That transformation begins and has its roots in the Sunday liturgy.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan of the Archdiocese of New York in a recent letter commented, "If you want your faith to wither up and die, quit going to *Sunday Mass*. As the body will die without food, the soul will expire without nourishment. That sustenance comes at the *Sunday Eucharist*." The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist ought to be something that feeds our entire week. From it we should draw strength, communion, and sustenance. Celebrating the Sabbath around the table of the Lord affords us all the opportunity to know again the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharistic feast, in the Word of God proclaimed, in the worshipping community and through the presider.

The *National Study on Youth in Religion* reports that when adolescents attend Mass with their parents, they are more likely to be engaged in other activities that foster growth in faith. Youth report that adults are the greatest influence on their moral decision making. Adolescents who attend Mass more frequently benefit from a variety of caring adult relationships and are more

likely to have positive relationships with their parents. Additionally, they are significantly less likely to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs or engage in premarital sex.

TO OUR YOUTH

You are gift to the Church of Des Moines. I want nothing more for you than for you to grow in your love of God and your knowledge of the church. This process of adolescent catechesis/youth ministry which will see you through your high school years will offer you the opportunity to know and love God more deeply. The education in the faith will gift you with a foundation to build upon for the duration of your lives. As our forbears in the faith of the Church of Des Moines have witnessed this gift is the greatest they could hand on.

TO OUR PARENTS

You are your children's first teachers of the faith. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, names the family the *domestic church*. The document further states that, "In it [domestic church] parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children." (LG 11) The challenges and pressures of parenting are many. The day you presented your child for baptism the Christian community promised to assist you in handing the faith on to your child. The process of adolescent catechesis will continue to aid you as you witness to the faith that sustains you. This four-year process will feed the head, heart, hands and spirit of your adolescent. What is provided in this Church initiative is the opportunity to be fed at deeper, more complete levels as they advance through their high school years.

TO OUR PARISHES

At the present time there are three identifiable ways that adolescents are nurtured at work in our diocese. Some parishes have formal religious education programs for 9th through 12th grade. This is primarily a classroom model. Other parishes provide catechesis as a part of their youth ministry programs. Some parishes may not have anything formal but will gather young people from time to time. The process that is being introduced as part of our centennial celebration blends all of the above. Catechesis is very important. Youth ministry is equally important. This process will blend them together and offer our young people the best that catechesis and youth ministry has to offer. The diocesan departments of evangelization and catechesis and youth ministry stand ready to assist you in the development and implementation of this wonderful opportunity for our young people.

The Role of the Sacrament of Confirmation

It is my hope and desire to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation with our young people as they journey through their high school years. The Holy Spirit has much to offer them as they stand on the brink of adulthood. The preparation for reception of the sacrament is being designed to be integrated within the four year process of adolescent catechesis. It has been my

experience that young people in ninth, tenth or eleventh grade are by reason of age and maturity more apt to benefit from this sacrament. They are able to understand more completely the meaning of the sacrament and enter into the celebration of the sacrament more fully and thus lead to a more pastoral developmentally appropriate outcome. The process that will lead to the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation will be available in the fall of 2011 and thereafter introduced over time in our parishes.

Conclusion

Our young people's continued growth in knowledge of the faith and love of God is a priority. *Renewing the Vision; A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* reminds us that "The ministry of catechesis helps adolescents *develop* a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community, and *increase* their knowledge of the core content of the Catholic faith." (RTV p. 29) The high school years are important and formative; the catechesis made available to our youth "should take into account their physical, social, and psychological conditions." (NDC, p. 199)

My prayer and my hope is; that every high school aged young person in the Diocese of Des Moines will accept this gift of faith with all of its challenges and in a culture that makes endless demands of them; that all parents will welcome this process and see the Church in Southwest Iowa as partners with them in handing on faith to their children; that our parishes will embrace this gift and be fully engaged in the journey of faith with the young church of Des Moines.

My young friends, you are essential to the vibrant life of the Church of Des Moines. Count on my support and prayer in enabling your participation in our life together.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines