

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE YTM PROGRAM

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Theological Pedagogies for Fostering Christian Discipleship

The New Testament Greek root meaning of disciple (*Mathetes*) is learner, pupil, or apprentice. Christian discipleship begins with an interest in learning about Christ and his ways. Through searching and learning this interest grows into a fundamental option to follow in the footsteps of Christ and practice a Christian way of living. Catholic theology argues that interest in learning about Christ is the first step in the process of conversion. It states that the “whole Christian life of the Lord’s disciple is based on the fundamental option to freely follow Christ” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, #56-58).

Pedagogies of theological education that foster Christian discipleship involve a basic intellectual conversion from non-interest to interest in learning about Christ. Intellectual conversion utilizes the Christian tradition to expand the horizon of questions that young people have about Christ and his ways. This conversion is a basic process of change from self-absorption to self-transcendence. This change occurs through experiences of God’s love and grace and learning about Christ and the Christian tradition. Many youth experience Christ’s radical love at these programs through various curricular components. This love expands their intellectual, social, spiritual, and communal horizons. It fosters new and interesting questions. Pedagogies that expand young people’s horizon for asking interesting questions about Christ and his ways are important for a life long journey of Christian discipleship.

Constructing Initial Faith: Data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (Smith, 2005) suggest that adolescents are becoming less literate about the Christian tradition. This is especially true for Catholic youth. The process of intellectual conversion within Saint John’s program includes pedagogies for constructing an intellectual foundation for faith in Christ through reading, reflecting, and discussing the gospels and theological texts. St. Paul writes, *How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?* (Romans 10:14) We cannot assume all the youth entering our program have even an introductory understanding of Christianity. An essential aspect of a theological pedagogy for discipleship formation includes proclaiming and teaching the good news of Jesus Christ to young people and providing time and space for youth to intellectually appropriate it through a dialectical process of critical reflection and questioning. Pedagogically this is most systematically done in the theology classes, but also embodied in the relationships youth form with each other and the counselors/staff who are all theology students in college or seminary. The community of faith becomes part of the pedagogy for constructing faith. The culmination of the intellectual conversion within faith construction is a freely chosen and owned faith that has a desire to continue learning about Christ and the tradition.

Critically Thinking about Faith: It appears to us that very few adolescents have been encouraged in their home congregations to search and raise questions about the Christian faith. Too often congregations simply seek to indoctrinate young people without engaging them in dialogue about the tradition. If pedagogies are to be authentically theological, then they must provide freedom to question, doubt, and/or assent. If theology is understood as “faith seeking understanding,” then there needs to be a freedom to seek and understand. Without this freedom it is our contention that young people remain locked within a childhood faith that too often asks young people to simply obey church authority rather than appropriate the meaning of faith within their own lives.

Christian Discipleship: The ultimate goal of theological pedagogies for discipleship formation, ongoing conversion, and leadership development is a freely chosen informed faith that leads to a way of life embodied in communal and individual Christian practices. The intellectual hallmark of this owned faith is an ongoing interest in learning more about Christ and his ways.

The Youth in Theology and Ministry pedagogy for theological education fostering the growth toward owned faith includes:

- Twenty hours of classroom theological instruction for the youth by seminary professors. It is important to recognize that most of the youth come to these programs having been taught by volunteer religion teachers with very little theological background. Youth find learning from knowledgeable theologians very meaningful. We have discovered that educating youth about the themes of Catholic Social Teaching has been very influential in fostering ongoing learning among the youth.
- Hiring counselors who are theology majors or minors in college or in seminary. These counselors embody interest in theological learning for the youth they serve.
- Theological reflection outside of the classroom through journaling, small group reflection, prayer, art, and public presentations on their service-justice project they develop and lead with the help of an adult mentor back in their home congregation between the two summers.
- An overall environment of inquiry and searching. An ecology where youth have freedom to ask questions and to search. A basic pedagogy that resists and confronts the tendency of denominational indoctrination. Establishing a community of inquiry that has space for questions and doubts.

What “theological shoulders” does the youth theology program stand on?

Introduction

The importance of a sense of place here at Saint John’s Abbey and University, in partnership with the College of Saint Benedict and Saint Benedict’s Monastery, is foundational to the theology utilized within the Youth in Theology and Ministry program. Benedictine values and spirituality influence all that happens here. The theological foundations examined below all flow from the Benedictine charter of this place. Particularly Benedict’s “listen with the ear of your heart” and “treat all as Christ.”

Holy Mystery

Augustine, Aquinas, and Rahner write about God as Holy Mystery. Human knowledge and human articulation can never exhaust or completely grasp the totality of who God is or who we are as human beings. Avery Dulles, SJ, commenting on the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Abbott, 1966), argues the term "mystery" indicates that the Church, as a divine reality inserted in history, cannot be fully captured by human thought or language (14). Paul VI said in his opening allocution at the second session in 1963, "The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and greater exploration" (15). The concept of God and Church as "Holy Mystery" provides a foundation for the theological pedagogy employed at Saint John's youth program because it opens space for dialogue, searching, questioning, and appropriation. Rarely do congregations employ Holy Mystery as a foundational theological principle. The current Catholic hierarchical emphasis on doctrinal literacy for youth too often gives the impression of a theology characterized as *sola doctrina* or *sola Magisterium*. This gives the impression that revelation is closed and faith formation is simply about memorizing what has already been revealed. This static theology promotes indoctrination and denies a dynamic process of discipleship. Holy Mystery as a theological construct conveys revelation as ongoing, the Holy Spirit as still active in human history, and a call to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit for our time and place. Holy Mystery provides an intellectual framework that fosters life-long learning about God.

Conversion

The idea of conversion at the heart of YTM's pedagogy rests on the theological shoulders of Bernard Lonergan. *Method in Theology* (Lonergan, 1972) describes three different types of conversion: intellectual conversion, moral conversion, and religious conversion. He explains that what is common to all three types of conversion is shift *away from* what is unauthentic in life *to* new meaning and commitment to a distinct way of living in the world (pp. 238-242). Lonergan argues that Christ's love is at the center of this shift from self-absorption or self-enclosure to self-transcendence. Robert Doran (2011) explains:

What Lonergan calls religious conversion, then, is a process that frees one from the self-enclosure that Lonergan calls radical lovelessness. God is love, our scriptures tell us, and whoever abides in love abides in God, whether one acknowledges this or not. This process, more often than not, is mediated by participation in some religious community (p.7).

For Lonergan, authentic humanness occurs through an ongoing dialogic process of self-transcendence away from lovelessness and self-absorption to the radical love of Jesus Christ and self-transcendence.

Intellectual conversion is a significant aspect of the conversion process. Radical lovelessness distorts the horizon of one's intellectual interest and concerns. It significantly impacts cognitively the range of questions a person is even interested in asking. Once again Doran explains Lonergan's idea here:

Intellectual conversion in its basic form will open that horizon of questions. It will transform one's cognitional life so that questions regarding meaning and truth are pursued for their own sake, and not for utilitarian and narrowly pragmatic

purposes. Lonergan uses terms such as ‘detached’ and ‘unrestricted’ to refer to this attitude. But what moves one beyond a utilitarian and purely pragmatic intellectual life, which after all is self-absorbed, self-enclosed, self-referential, except the freedom from self-absorption that comes from a radical and unconditional falling in love, genuine religious conversion? (8)

Doran highlights that for Lonergan, intellectual conversion demands raising and answering questions.

This theology of conversion is foundational for the pedagogical practices employed by YTM. However, it should be noted that this *pedagogy of question* is done within the security of a practicing faith-filled Christian community. This is essential because it models for young people that the faith community is comfortable with questions while maintaining a deep and abiding love of Christ. YTM’s holistic pedagogical practices seek to teach and proclaim Christ’s radical love in such a way that it continually expands the horizon for new and interesting questions about Christ and his ways. This methodology is utilized to encourage life-long conversion from self-absorption to Christian discipleship.

Incarnation

YTM also rests on the shoulders of the theological concept of incarnation. This is a central mystery of Christianity. “The Church calls ‘Incarnation’ the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it” (CCC # 458).

The general view of the incarnation is that God sent his only son Jesus (who was fully human and fully divine) to walk and live on the earth for 33 years. He taught and preached and healed. He was crucified, died, and rose from the dead. Jesus ascended into heaven. In this concept of the incarnation, the body of Jesus, the word made flesh, was on earth for 33 years and is now in heaven.

Theologian Ron Rolheiser writes in *The Holy Longing*:

“Where it is wrong is that it gives the impression that the incarnation was a thirty-year experiment, a one-shot incursion by God into human history. In this version, God came to earth physically and then, after 33 years, went back home. It uses the past tense for the incarnation and that is a dangerous under-understanding. The incarnation is still going on and it is just as real and as radically physical as when Jesus of Nazareth, in the flesh walked the dirt roads of Palestine” (p. 76).

“God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink becomes a sacrament. God’s many faces are now everywhere, in flesh, tempered and turned down, so that our human eyes can see him. God, in his many-faced face, has become as accessible, and visible, as the nearest water tap. That is the why of the incarnation” (p. 78).

“Scripture uses the expression the ‘Body of Christ’ to mean three things: Jesus, the historical person who walked this earth for 33 years; the Eucharist, which is also the physical presence of God among us; and the body of believers, which is also the real presence. To say the word ‘Christ’ is to refer, at one and the same time, to Jesus, the

Eucharist, and to the community of faith” (p. 79).

“We are the Body of Christ. This is not an exaggeration, nor a metaphor. To say that the body of believers is the Body of Christ is not to say something that scripture does not. Scripture, and Paul in particular, never tells us that the body of believers replaces Christ’s body, nor that it represents Christ’s body, nor that it is Christ’s mystical body. It says simply: ‘We are Christ’s body’” (pp.79-80).

“The body of believers, like the Eucharist, is the Body of Christ in an organic way. It is not a corporation, but a body; not just a mystical reality, but a physical one; and not something that represents Christ, but something that is him” (p. 80).

“If it is true that we are the Body of Christ, and it is, then God’s presence in the world today depends very much upon us. We have to keep God present in the world in the same way as Jesus did. We have to become, as Teresa of Avila so simply put it, God’s physical hands, feet, mouthpiece, and heart in the world” (p. 80).

An authentic experience of community and communion is central to what happens at YTM. The incarnation is a theological principle that enfleshes the experience of community into communion with Christ. At YTM, the community comes to understand itself as the “Body of Christ.” Christ is enfleshed in belonging to a vibrant loving community. We glimpse an understanding that we share in Christ’s humanity and divinity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

The Word became flesh to make us "*partakers of the divine nature.*" "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God."⁷⁹ "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God."⁸⁰ "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."⁸¹ (#460)

Also central to YTM is the notion that we are called in flesh and blood to be Christ for the world particularly through the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. We are called to become the hands, feet, mouth, and heart of Christ. We become the Body of Christ for the world. We are called to be participants in Christ mission to proclaim the Reign of God. All this is contained in the theological doctrine of the incarnation.

Catholic Social Teaching

YTM utilizes Catholic Social Teaching as a basic framework for helping youth explore the vocational call to be missionary disciples. The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. We have found that Catholic Social Teaching inspires youth. The YTM Summer II afternoon curriculum focuses on the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching each year. The overall theme of the YTM Summer Institute also focuses in on one of the seven themes and explores its relationship to Christian discipleship. The seven themes are:

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person
2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation

3. Rights and Responsibilities
4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
6. Solidarity
7. Care for God's Creation