

Growing as a Catholic Christian:

Life in the Spirit

The Development of Religious Identity

Putting the Pieces Together

To provide a helpful context for the material presented in this essay, let's briefly review a few significant concepts of religious identity and styles of faith and briefly describe four faith styles that stereotypically emerge in a sequential order throughout the life process. They are:

Experienced faith. Most commonly or appropriately seen in young children; a nonreflective and imitative style of faith; a product more of socialization than of education or personal choice

Affiliative faith. Usually appears in early adolescence; the need for parental and peer acceptance can lead to the desire for participation in a caring community; that desire can result in an openness to learning about and accepting the traditions of the Church

Searching faith. Commonly emerges in latter senior high years and young adulthood; often characterized by questioning, doubt, and serious reflection on the faith inherited from others; concern for or interest in formal religion may wane while interest in personal spirituality may blossom; frequently reflected earlier in girls than in boys

Owned faith. An adult style of faith, if developed at all; a deeply personal faith that is expressed by actions and social behavior; participation in and commitment to a particular religious tradition are freely chosen and embraced, not imposed

We might better understand religious identity if we see it as the combination of or interaction between two dimensions of a person's life experience. Those two dimensions are (1) the connection with and participation in a particular communal religious tradition and (2) the personal spiritual journey, with its myriad twists and turns,

highs and lows, challenges and moments of grace. Those two dimensions of religious identity—communal participation and personal spirituality—intersect and impact each other in various ways throughout the life process.

The following discussion identifies the communal-religious as well as the personal-spiritual characteristics of an individual as she or he moves through the four styles of faith. The material sums up what Catholic identity might look like during each stage of the life process, using the categories of wisdom, works, and worship to frame these observations.

Keep in mind that throughout this discussion we are dealing with *stereotypical faith development*; every individual will experience and express this process in unique ways. Also, the process of development described here may well have been much cleaner or more predictable for past generations of Catholics than it is today. Cultural changes and the rapidity with which those changes occur are dramatically affecting all these dynamics.

Catholic Identity Through the Life Process

Experienced Faith

Communal-Religious Characteristics

With regard to communal-religious characteristics, the person in experienced faith will commonly encounter images and expressions of Catholicism within the family life and home. The young child may see various art and artifacts of religion as part of the home's decor—a crucifix on a wall, the family Bible on the shelf, an image of the Last Supper in the dining room. During some holidays, music with religious themes may fill the home. In a devout family, the child may first see parents and siblings in prayer at mealtime and gradually begin to join in such practices. Perhaps even very early in life, the youngster may attend church services with the family and, while doing so, slowly pick up some of the language and symbol system of the Church.

We would hope during these early years that the child experiences the Church as a kind of extended family, a place of welcome. When the child goes to church with the family, other members of the community warmly greet everyone. During communion, when parents and older siblings receive the consecrated host, the child might receive a special blessing from the Eucharistic minister, a physical sign of being included and cared for.

Importantly, much of the religious formation that occurs during this stage of the process is affective, intuitive, and relational rather than cognitive and rational. The individual may rarely be able to

recover the memories of those formative years, but they can be decisive in laying the foundation for future faith development.

Personal-Spiritual Characteristics

When we speak of the spiritual development of the individual, we do not mean to suggest that the communal experiences described above are "impersonal." Clearly, such experiences can profoundly touch the heart of the person and dramatically impact other areas of life. For the sake of analysis and the purposes of this discussion, it is helpful to distinguish between these dimensions of a person's religious identity.

Personal and spiritual characteristics here refer to such profoundly important elements of an individual's identity as the dominant image of God, the experience of the numinous or mysterious dimensions of life, the kind of prayer that erupts out of the heart in response to God's presence, and so on. These are all dimensions of identity that may be fed by and often named within the community but which the individual often experiences as deeply personal, private, and beyond expression.

For the young child of experienced faith, foundational images of God are being formed but will not normally be conscious. For a child raised in a loving home, God will often be first imaged as a gentle, caring parent—a wonderful way to begin! Regarding prayer, the child may initially, and for some time, be essentially an observer of the prayer of others. Over time, the child will begin to imitate such prayer, perhaps making the sign of the cross in reverse, memorizing and reciting simple meal and bedtime prayers, and so on. All these experiences, often vicarious and learned without much thought, help form a foundation on which all future faith development can grow.

The Catholic in Experienced Faith

The sense of Catholic identity in this stage of development is rooted primarily in the person's identification with the parents and the experience of family. We might sum up the dominant characteristics as follows:

Wisdom. The person of experienced faith may be able to memorize the "facts" of faith but not understand them. Thought processes are very concrete and literal, and comprehension of religious beliefs may well reflect this. The sound of thunder triggers images of God bowling, or the child imagines a God with a long, white beard, sitting on a golden throne.

Works. Morally, this is a time for following the rules and making decisions on the basis of reward and punishment. The child wants to

please others, particularly the parents, whose approval is central to the child's security and happiness. Or, put negatively, the child avoids those things that can bring on the parent's anger and the threat of abandonment.

Worship. The sense of the sacred, many theorists believe, is innate and fully within the experience of young children. In fact, the cynic might suggest that as young children we come by an awareness of God's presence naturally, and we then spend the better part of life burying or forgetting it. In any case, the young child is capable of intuiting a sense of deep meaning in nature and within relationships that can translate as well into enjoyment of communal worship. The child will often be imitative and express a sense of belonging to the community through the desire to be part of the community's worship—standing and sitting when others do, making initial attempts at genuflecting, holding the missalette (perhaps upside down), and so on. All this is appropriate and foundational to future growth—not to mention often adorable!

Affiliative Faith

Communal-Religious Characteristics

The person in affiliative faith, particularly if the foundation of experienced faith has been positive and life-giving, will often seek a deeper sense of belonging and engagement in the life of the broader community. If the parish provides the opportunity for such involvement, the young adolescent may join a youth group and enthusiastically participate in its activities. Depending on personality and interests, youth may even begin to assert leadership in such programs.

To the degree that young people feel accepted and supported by the community, they may show genuine interest in its beliefs, practices, and even its history, all of which can help them feel more a part of the Church's life. Involvement in the Church's ministries, especially in its mission to serve the poor, can tap into the budding idealism of many young people and their desire to make a difference in the world.

Young adolescents will normally not express such enthusiasm for engagement in the life of the Church without age-appropriate and high-quality ministry, including creative approaches to religious education. The Church's investment in such ministry in time, talent, and economic support can reap great dividends.

Personal-Spiritual Characteristics

The young adolescent can be powerfully attracted to Jesus of Nazareth and find his life story and message genuinely fascinating. Growing to understand Jesus as one who took on life as we experience

it (see Phil. 2:6–8) and one who grew and developed over time as we do (see Luke 2:52) can be freeing and mind-expanding for the young person, who can also be drawn to the image of Jesus as a friend. Some critics of youth ministry programs in recent decades have suggested that they too often present to their young participants a "warm-fuzzy Jesus," a "buddy God" who forgives everything and demands nothing of them. I think this is a false charge and misses the point. Presenting Jesus as a supportive and caring friend is perfectly appropriate for young people who yearn to discover such a friend.

In prayer styles, the young adolescent can also enjoy praying to Jesus, imagined and experienced as accessible, present, and attentive. Guided meditations that lead the young person to imagine a personal encounter with the human Jesus are consistently effective with this age group. Young adolescents may also demonstrate increased openness to communal and even spontaneous prayer, *if* they feel safe and accepted within a caring group of peers. If such an environment does not exist, however, or if a young person feels threatened in any way by possible rejection by peers, this will not be the case. The young person will understandably resist participation in any forms of prayer or other activity that might lead to embarrassment or public humiliation.

The Catholic in Affiliative Faith

In this style of faith, a person's Catholic identity is rooted in deepening participation in the life of the community of faith, the Church. Depending on age and rate of development, the person in affiliative faith will reflect characteristics such as the following:

Wisdom. The adolescent in affiliative faith is able to grow in comprehension of the Church's beliefs and practices *as* the young person's *potential for abstract thinking emerges*. I stress this condition because adolescents reflect great diversity regarding this and other developmental traits. Cognitive theorists suggest that the capacity for abstract thought emerges around age twelve *at the earliest*, and substantially later for many people. This is one of the reasons why ministry among young adolescents can be quite challenging; the developmental starting points within a single group of junior high youth can vary widely.

Works. Moral decision making, many suggest that adolescent behavior is centered in the desire and search for group acceptance. It is true that young people will often do what their peers expect them to do, particularly in matters of taste and group identification—styles of dress, choice of music, and so on. However, research also shows that when it comes to fundamental moral choices, young adolescents

commonly live out the values modeled by the significant adults in their life. Most often, of course, this will be their parents, but other adults—important relatives, favorite teachers and coaches, ministers, and others—can also be highly influential. This is positive and encouraging information—at least when the adults in question are living according to sound values.

Worship. Young adolescents have a rather innate understanding of symbol and ritual. Much of their behavior—fashion, hairstyles, and the decor of their bedroom—reflects this awareness. This appreciation of symbol and ritual can lead the young person to respond strongly to creative prayer and worship. However, adolescents can be easily bored by and even rebel against routine practices that they view as "the same old stuff." We should not be surprised or greatly concerned, therefore, when young people express boredom with the Mass and other religious practices. In a certain sense, we should be concerned if they don't because unquestioned acceptance may be more a sign of apathy than of genuine appreciation.

The gradual disenchantment with the faith style and religious practices of childhood is a positive sign of growth in the young adolescent. It means an inadequate and limiting style of faith is being left behind—albeit sometimes clumsily—and opening to one that is deeper, richer, more meaningful, and life-giving. But that growth, like all genuine growth, is not without its share of pain—for both the adolescent and for those who live and work with him.

Searching Faith

Communal-Religious Characteristics

The boredom and rebellion regarding structured religion that begin to surface among some young adolescents grow and become more widespread as they move into the senior high years. We must be cautious, however, about painting with too broad a brush on this point. The stereotype of the angry or sullen adolescent is often exaggerated, creating expectations on the part of adults that become self-fulfilling. Nevertheless, many young people do struggle for greater independence from their parents and other adults, and they demonstrate that struggle in various ways. Strong-willed and assertive extroverts may become argumentative, challenging parental values and arguing points of theology with their catechists. Introverts can become sullen and nonresponsive. These characteristics generally emerge (and, gratefully, pass) earlier for girls than for boys.

Importantly, the apparent disinterest in or alienation from institutional religion on the part of many adolescents is precisely that—a matter of appearances. That is, the young may feign such attitudes

out of concern that their peers may think less of them if they are "into religion." Research continually affirms a deep interest on the part of many young adults in matters of religion and spirituality. But they are seeking religious experiences and understandings that better respond to their maturing cognitive, affective, and relational abilities and needs.

Personal-Spiritual Characteristics

Some critics of youth ministry claim that we too often present to young people a Jesus who is warm, cuddly, and undemanding, one who gives everything and expects nothing. That critique might be valid if we fail to call young people in searching faith to a deeper understanding of and response to Jesus and his message. As their idealism and desire for heroic models expand, this is the time to challenge young people with a fuller picture of the Jesus of the Gospels. They need and want to hear of the Jesus who confronted the values and mores of his time, who chastised both political and religious leaders for their hypocrisy, and who called people to be as fully human as he was.

The young person in searching faith can also find the genuine and profound spirituality of Jesus attractive, even fascinating. What vision drove Jesus to speak and act as he did? Who is the God that Jesus grew to know and then reveal to us? Why did he go off alone to pray so often, and what did he learn in those times of solitude? Where did his incredible compassion and sense of justice come from? What did he understand about the meaning of life that allowed him to face a horrible death rather than deny the truth he had come to embrace? Exploring the story of Jesus in such detail—which, not so incidentally, we challenge them to do during the period of formation—can engage the young person in a search for greater religious and spiritual depth. Many are ready to respond to such a challenge.

The Catholic in Searching Faith

The Catholic Christian in searching faith is often on the threshold of genuine conversion, a time of personal transformation when the person is invited personally to appropriate the faith and religious expressions that had initially been given by others. Significantly, this transformation for many will be slow and long-term, perhaps lasting throughout young adulthood. Others may rather easily move toward a free embrace of the tradition in which they have been raised. For some, searching faith will become rather permanent, leading to a life of ongoing questioning and searching for deeper meaning. All these responses to the Gospel of Jesus are legitimate, and each can be celebrated during the rite of Confirmation. For in this sacrament we do not

mark arrival at Christian maturity. Rather, we celebrate the desire on the part of both the young person and the community to continue faithfully on the lifelong journey of conversion.

Wisdom. The person in searching faith is often seeking—sometimes consciously and actively, often intuitively and sporadically—a personal philosophy of life that makes sense personally. This person wants to understand "how all the pieces fit together." Toward that end, the young person will often question, doubt, and even reject basic beliefs presented during childhood.

The wise leader, whether a parent, mentor, or catechist, will respect the intellectual struggle of the person in searching faith, recognize the need for it, and walk along as a caring companion. In the familiar and powerful Old Testament story, Jacob came to a new sense of identity only by wrestling with God through the long, dark night (see Gen. 32:22–30). The "night work" of searching faith is often required of those who wish to grow in their identity as Christians.

Works. The person in searching faith may struggle with new moral issues and decisions. Contemporary culture and the advances of science present new moral dilemmas almost daily—genetic engineering, environmental issues, the right to access information on the Internet, and so on. Such issues can be the focus of heated, and often enjoyable, discussion and debate.

More problematic, though, is the common desire among some young searchers to test out new behaviors, to seek moral guidelines that "work for me." Every parent and mentor of a young adult knows the fear that attends such experimentation. We know the dangers that life holds, and we know as well that young people today face far more frequent—and more dangerous—moral challenges than we ever did.

Worship. The senior high young person in searching faith will continue to struggle with and often resist traditional forms of worship. Even more, the desire for intellectual and moral independence may lead to rebellion against those who try to *force* such worship. The young person may with some legitimacy claim that mandated worship is not worship at all. The appropriate pastoral response in such cases is seldom clear and almost never easy. Do we "stand by our guns" and demand continued adherence to our own religious practices? Or do we allow young people to test their wings and experience the consequences? Not an easy call for parents or other adult guides.

On the other hand, although reacting against some of the prayer forms and worship practices of childhood, young people in searching faith may discover new forms of spiritual nourishment. They may begin to meditate regularly, discover the spiritual enrichment of journal

writing, or respond well to *lectio divina* or other methods of praying the Scriptures. Wise ministers will tap into this openness to new prayer forms and styles and expose the young to multiple options from which to build a personal prayer life.

Adults often worry, so the saying goes, that young people are "losing their faith." But adolescents in searching faith are not losing their faith; they are, rather, losing the faith of their parents and other adults in an effort to discover their own. Despite the very real challenges involved, all who live and work with those in searching faith should commend and support them in that effort.

Owned Faith

Because owned faith is, by definition, an adult style of faith, we will review its basic characteristics rather quickly here. It is important to keep in mind, however, that we want young people to aspire, although perhaps not consciously, to the kinds of characteristics described here. In our ministry with them, we want to lay a foundation on which young people can stand as they reach for genuine Christian maturity.

Communal-Religious Characteristics

The person of owned faith has embraced religious tradition with freedom and commitment. This person is independent of the tradition but dedicated to it; in that sense, the believer owns the tradition but is not owned by it. Such free and full commitment means that the person brings new vibrancy and life to the community rather than simply sustaining or preserving what the Church had been. The believer has *become* the Church and taken on its mission rather than simply belonging to it.

Personal-Spiritual Characteristics

For persons of owned faith, images of God evolve, shift, and grow in response to new experiences and understandings. Christians of owned faith recognize that if they are not careful, they can make idols out of images and "make God in his own image." As Christians, they may feel drawn to direct prayer to Abba, the one Jesus revealed, rather than to Jesus himself. They will be increasingly open to the promptings of the Spirit, who calls them to contemplation and even, on occasion, to deep immersion in sacred mystery. The Christian of owned faith knows that in order to grow to fullness of faith, they must inevitably come to the commitment that Jesus gradually learned throughout his life and then embraced fully on the cross: "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

The Catholic of Owned Faith

The mature Catholic does not simply belong to the Church as if to a club. Rather, the believer is committed to being the Church in the world, taking on its mission and continuing to grow as a disciple of Christ. These Catholics understand that there is a "hierarchy of truths," and they know that while the central dogmas of the Church are lasting and call for deep commitment and conviction, other less central practices may change and develop, even disappear, without shaking their identity as a Catholic.

The Catholic of owned faith embraces the challenge and responsibilities that come with mature moral decision making. These Catholics know as well that they will be judged by their engagement in service to others in need, and they will embrace the call to help heal a broken world. With an eye on the Reign of God, their heart grows in compassion for others. Faith will sustain that hope, while weakness and powerlessness will keep them humble before God.

The Catholic of owned faith participates fully in the worship and sacramental life of the community, not because of mandates or fear of the consequences, but out of a deep hunger to join with fellow believers in praise of God. Engagement in the community's worship fuels and enriches the personal life of prayer, and vice versa. Nurtured by the faith of fellow believers, mature Catholics live a life of hope and trust in the promise of Christ: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

The Central Characteristics of Catholic Christianity

The characteristics of Roman Catholicism are these:

- Catholics believe that God is present to, in, and through all dimensions of existence—the natural world, persons, communities, historical events, natural objects—in all creation. This is known in theology as the principle of sacramentality, and on this basis the Church has evolved its complex sacramental system as well as its remarkable openness to various forms of art, music, religious artifacts, and so on.
- Catholics are convinced that God uses all these elements of creation to communicate grace—to reveal God's own nature and to enter into loving relationship with people. Known as the principle of mediation, it means that God not only is present to the created universe but actually reaches out to humanity and all creation through it. Many religions view the created world as evil and dangerous; Catholics, on the other hand, embrace and celebrate the world as a gift and revelation of God.

- Catholics have a profound sense of discovering, experiencing, and responding to God in union with other believers within community. Catholics do not see themselves as individuals who enter into a relationship with God in isolation from others, which is often referred to as a "me and Jesus" understanding of faith. Rather, Catholics see themselves as a people who are "in this thing together."

Note. The rest of the characteristics in this list are in many ways grounded in one or more of the first three traits, which might be considered the most fundamental and central defining characteristics of Catholicism.

- The word *catholic* means "universal." Catholicism is committed to proclaiming the message of Jesus to all people in all cultures and at all times; it does not recognize national or ethnic boundaries. Additionally, *Catholic* means that wherever Catholics gather, they share a fundamental belief system and approach to worship—especially in the Eucharist—that immediately identifies and unites them, regardless of the barriers of language and culture.
- Catholicism is open to all truth and to every good value, no matter what its origin. One of the reasons Catholicism is so rich and textured in its beliefs, religious expressions, and practices is because it is willing to incorporate good ideas from anyone, including other religions. Because of the belief that God is present and available everywhere, Catholics are willing to explore all possibilities in the search for truth.
- Catholics, although diverse in culture, are united in core beliefs and practices, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is often called the source and summit of Catholic life, in part because it serves as a source of unity throughout the world.
- Catholicism is historically rooted in the experience and witness of the Apostles and in the life of the earliest community of believers, whose story is told in the New Testament. No other Christian church can make this claim as totally or with as much historical evidence as can the Catholic Church.
- The beliefs and practices of Catholicism are rooted in both the Scriptures and Tradition, Tradition being the beliefs and practices that the Apostles handed down and that the Church continues faithfully to teach and interpret for every new generation.
- Catholicism tries to take a position of "both-and" rather than "either-or" in regard to most matters. This is why such incredible diversity of opinion and practice within the Catholic Church exists—and, let's be honest, so many factions that often disagree with one another! Catholics are reluctant to ostracize anyone for

holding different views. This characteristic is reflected as well in Catholic theology, which holds in creative tension such elements as grace and nature, sin and salvation, faith and works, the Scriptures and Tradition, authority and freedom, unity and diversity.

- Catholicism respects and embraces a wide variety of spiritualities and prayer forms. Throughout its rich history, the Catholic Church has accepted from other traditions or created within its own community everything from the rosary to the Jesus Prayer, from mantras to benedictions, from Gregorian chant to rock Masses, from contemplation to charismatic prayer.
- Catholicism recognizes and respects the human capacity for rational thought as a profoundly important gift of God and urges its members to seek truth wherever it can be found. Catholics hold that faith and reason are not enemies but partners in the search for truth. It was the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages that founded the first great universities. Catholics are not expected to accept blindly whatever they are told by persons of authority. (Incidentally, such freedom of thought and conscience is a major distinction between a healthy religion and a cult.)
- Catholics recognize the authorized leadership role of the ordained minister and, in a special way, that of the bishops and the pope. As a community of faith rooted in the experience and witness of the Apostles of the early Church, Catholicism holds in special regard the bishops and the Pope, who are recognized as successors of the Apostles and are signs of Catholic unity and universality throughout the world.
- Catholics believe in the principle of shared leadership and the call to ministry of all believers. Although clearly the Pope and the bishops hold special positions of authority in the Church, all Catholics are called to share their unique gifts and talents with the faith community and with the world. Catholicism is not a religion in which all responsibility is delegated to others.
- Catholics honor and hold in particular esteem the great people of faith who have preceded them, the saints, and in a very dear and special way, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Catholics do not "worship" the saints or Mary, as some might contend. But Catholics see in these special people great models of what all are called to become as persons of faith.
- Catholics are committed to the transformation of the world through active engagement in the work of justice and peace. Catholics cannot seek escape from the problems of the world or from the evil systems in it that often abuse and destroy people, particularly

poverty, racism, and violence. Catholics believe that Jesus called his followers to change the world, not to run away from it.

(The material on this background piece is adapted from *Confirmed in a Faithful Community, Catechist's Theology Handbook*, by Thomas Zanzig [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2001], pages 142–157. Copyright © 2001 by Saint Mary's Press.)