



# Adult Faith Formation at a Crossroads: A Reflection

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Catherine Minkiewicz

**A** significant anniversary passed quietly in November 2006. Seven years ago, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* (OHWB), its pastoral letter on adult faith formation. With over 60,000 copies sold, this document has proven to be one of the better-selling publications of the USCCB, and it has done much to raise awareness of the need for adult faith formation. To date, many Catholic dioceses and parishes have implemented significant parts of the recommendations of *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* in their pastoral plans, and despite financial constraints in many locations, there has been generous funding for realizing the goals of the pastoral plan.

Yet one question persists with regard to this document: how do we move beyond the vision into application? How do we truly situate adult faith formation at the heart of church life without compromising other areas of faith formation? The *National Directory for Catechesis* reminds us that “the catechesis of adults is the principal form of catechesis” and that it is “the *organizing principle*...the axis around which revolves the catechesis of childhood and adolescence as well as that of old age” (188, 197). Adult faith formation is not “remedial religious education,” as some have suggested, nor can it be satisfied by a lecture series or lenten mission. What is called for is an integrated approach to all activities, including liturgy and stewardship, with the goal of forming a faith for adults that is living, explicit, and fruitful.

Nibbling at the edges of the faith formation process, or tinkering with a program here and there will not realize the vision for an integrated approach. It can only be enabled by adopting a paradigm shift, a whole new way of thinking about faith formation and church life and its about the practice of faith formation. Although many congregations today have started to think differently, the fact is that changing patterns of thinking and behaviors

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**Catherine Minkiewicz** is an adult faith formation consultant in the New England area. She has served as the chair of the National Advisory Committee on Adult Religious Education (NACARE) and on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Catechesis. She holds an MA in theology from the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, NY.

is hard to do, even in the best of situations. Think about how much effort it takes to move from driving a stick shift to an automatic; chances are your left foot still goes for the clutch whenever you brake. Or consider what happens when you suffer the loss of a close family member or friend; it can take weeks, months, or even years before you really start to understand that they are gone.

When we decide to move from the theoretical to the practical, we ask questions such as: How are we going to do this? What steps do we need to take to go from a child-centered classroom model to a more community-based model? How do we prepare the congregation for this change? Some simply change the focus of faith formation from children to adults. This can be a good start, but it doesn't use an integrated model that allows each and every person in the community to be formed at the best and appropriate level. Also, when serious efforts have been made to present programs that truly recognize "the parish *is* the curriculum" (OHWB, no. 118), there can be great resistance from the community. Content may be stressed over methodology, texts over context, and parents protest that they can't just "drop off" their children. The solution is still a way off.

Although for most churches a holistic approach to faith formation—one that incorporates parish, family, school, and community—is a new undertaking, there have been inroads made that we would do well to consider. Of particular interest is the movement to connect faith formation with everyday human activities, as described in the book *Practicing Our Faith*, a series of essays edited by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra.

This approach calls for a personal reflection on our daily routines, and asks us to consider how we bring the ordinary to holiness, how we recognize the divine in the ordinary. Practices such as offering hospitality, honoring the body, asking for and granting forgiveness, keeping Sabbath, making economic and political decisions, asceticism, discernment, healing, testimony, singing, and dying well all resonate with a sacramental imagination and provide a lens through which we can re-examine our lives in the light of the holy.

We regularly employ bread, wine, water, oil, fire, incense, embracing, laying on of hands, anointing, procession, darkness, and silence in our worship. Why not bring our awareness of these elements into our daily life? For example, how do we start our day as we emerge from the darkness of sleep? How do we show forgiveness to our spouse, our children, or those in the workplace? Is welcoming strangers to our community as easy for us as inviting guests to our home? How do we mark departures and returns? What care do we take with our bodies? How, when and with who do we eat our meals? What are our evening routines as we prepare for sleep? Do we embrace and offer a blessing before saying goodnight? Seemingly ordinary actions are sacramental in essence: bathing can be a baptismal act, reminding us that we are created in the image of God; gathering at table to share meals and stories of our lives echoes the Eucharist; speaking openly and charitably with those who have hurt us recalls the sacrament of reconciliation.

One year, while I was taking a class at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, I would walk from my job, across Harvard Yard to Weston. As I walked each week, I

began to notice the pattern that a crabapple's shadow cast on a rough concrete wall; how students regularly gathered at a particular fountain; even certain cracks in the pavement were familiar markers of my passage. After a few weeks the walk became a joy-filled meditation. An ordinary activity was transformed into a holy moment.

And so we are faced with a pastoral question: how do we help people, whether they are in the pews or not, come to an awareness of the holy richness of their daily lives, and act upon this awareness? There is a need at a grassroots level to empower people to open themselves to learning from the ordinary. And because all faith formation begins with evangelization, this may prove to be the catalyst for tapping into that holy yearning felt by so many people today.

## A Meditation on the Road Ahead: Luke 24:13–35

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I would like to invite you to join me in reflecting on the passage from Luke's gospel that inspired the title of the Catholic bishops' pastoral plan, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*. My own experience with this passage is that with each reading, a new insight usually surfaces. When I use this reading in a group setting, I usually script it for four voices: Jesus, the two disciples, and a narrator. As the readers become comfortable with their roles, an immediacy and inner understanding comes to life. So let it be with us. I invite you to become these voices, to listen with the ears of the heart, as we continue our mission to make the vision of adult faith formation a reality.

Come away and journey once again down a dusty road, following that first Easter.

*Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.*

We see the two disciples, distraught, their hopes and perhaps even their ambitions destroyed, brought to nothing, leaving Jerusalem for the safety and shelter of home. Like most people in crisis they are turned inward, looking for answers. One of their own has betrayed Jesus, their beloved leader and teacher, bringing him to humiliation and a brutal execution. As close associates of the accused, they fear for their own lives. Their frame of reference has been destroyed and most of their relationships, even their own self-identity, called into question. Nothing seems to have any rational meaning. They are fleeing for the safety of the familiar.

Faith formation is a journey, one that is rarely smooth. Our faith goes through “seasons, some apparently dormant, others fruitful” (OHWB no. 50). These days, the Christian Church itself is in crisis, and many are retreating to the nostalgic and familiar. It is a troubling time, one in which many look for instant answers rather than live with the discomfort of unanswered questions. Yet this crisis offers an opportunity to challenge leaders to consider new ways of being church, to explore new means of evangelization and faith formation.

*As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along*

*with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.*

On first reading this passage, as with other resurrection accounts, we may be surprised that the two disciples did not recognize Jesus. What was it about the resurrected Christ that made him beyond recognition to those who knew him best? At the same time we see the hospitality offered by the disciples to a stranger whom they encountered along the road. Although these two had been traumatized by the death of their friend Jesus, they were nevertheless moved to show hospitality to the stranger.

Formation takes place in community, whether in the church or at home or among friends. Ultimately, this is where we all encounter Christ. We need a safe place to tell our story to those whom we trust, who may or may not have shared in our experience. We need someone to walk with us as we try to make sense of that experience. This is an essential part of the catechumenal model (GDC, no. 59). And so like the two disciples, we must consider how we practice hospitality in our homes, churches, schools, and communities. Are we open to new ideas, new social situations, new practices and people?

*He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”*

Faith formation need not be a complicated matter. Sometimes all it takes is a simple question, like the one posed by Jesus to the disciples, to enter into dialogue. The key action here is listening. This is a prime component of hospitality, and means that we open ourselves to the concerns and questions of other

people. At times we want to rush in with our own message, what we consider to be the absolute truth; yet others may not be ready to hear what we have to say. They may not be at the same point in their faith journey that we are, and so we need to adjust our pace to theirs. We need to listen and be open to learning their truth.

If Jesus had not taken the time to ask a question and listen to the answer, his message might have been as unrecognizable to the disciples as his personal appearance. What are we doing to instill in our congregations and ourselves the practice of deep, active listening?

*They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?” “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”*

When I use this text with a group, I usually script it for four voices: the narrator, Jesus and the two disciples. This interchange, full

of pain and urgency, just can't be read in a calm or neutral voice. There are so many troubling details, starting with the disciple's incredulity that this stranger was unaware of what had transpired in Jerusalem during the last three days. Wasn't he coming from there as well? The details of the past days' events came tumbling out from the mouth of Cleopas: the weakness of the Roman leaders when faced with the mob, the apparent deviousness of the high priests as they sought to eliminate a challenge to their power, the ordeal of Jesus' torture and execution. How could the stranger not have known about all this?

Then there was the other extraordinary event that had occurred: the empty tomb with angels who told the women who had come to the tomb that Jesus was not there; he was alive! It was suspicious testimony to be sure, but even the prompt investigation of several apostles couldn't disprove it. As we develop our programs for adult faith formation, how are we shaped by the delivery of the message? Are we as excited and energized by the joy of salvation as were the women who delivered the news of the empty tomb? Or do we recount the good news as if we were reading the phone book out loud?

Here is another question for consideration: what if, as some Scripture scholars argue, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were a husband and wife? Perhaps the wife was one of the Marys who, along with Clopas, are depicted as standing at the foot of the cross in John's account. The spelling of the man's name—Clopas vs. Cleopas—is slightly different than in the Gospel, but there could be any number of reasons for that. Could we accept that a woman might have been considered a disciple? As we do faith formation, are we willing to

look forward past the issues of marginalization, along lines of gender, class, race, and belief, that have been a part of our history?

*He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.*

I am heartened at those times when I see Jesus somewhat short of patience, as he appears to be in this passage. It gives me hope for myself. How can we start to weave the treasure of our Scriptures throughout our faith formation initiatives? How can we facilitate the practice of regular, informed reading of the Bible in the households that we serve? How can we enrich the preaching in our congregations? We have at our disposal these sacred texts that many are still so ignorant of and yet so hungry for what they hold! At the same time, there needs to be a clarification of that which is truly the Christian Tradition, not just favored customs and practices. How slow we have been in seeing that Scripture and Tradition complement each other. At the heart of each is Christ himself.

*As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.*

This passage suggests the question, "What if...?" What if the disciples had not invited Jesus to

stay with them? Did they ever consider asking Jesus where he was headed? Would they have gone with him? How central was the disciples' invitation to all that followed! This stranger that they had met on the road shared with them knowledge on a far deeper level than simply recounting the occurrences of the past few days. He had assuaged their fears and confusion; he had renewed their thirst for spiritual knowledge.

We need to welcome strangers on their terms, and appreciate what we can learn from them. As St. Paul says, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us..." (Rom 12:6). Each of us has something of value to offer the Christian community as a whole, and we must accept and nurture this gift of diversity. In his Rule, Benedict writes, "All guests to the monastery should be welcomed as Christ," (no. 53) and even stipulates that each meal should have a choice of dishes because not all can eat the same. How flexible are we in our approaches to faith formation? Is it "my way or the highway," or are we open to different styles, different ways of teaching and learning?

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?"*

As we said before, everyday life carries the greatest potential for faith formation. What could be more basic than sitting down at table and breaking bread? Formation starts at home, taking time to prepare a meal and share it

together with family and friends. It carries over to the church, as care is taken to ensure that all have an opportunity for full, active, participation in the liturgy. It involves providing opportunities for preparing the liturgy, including familiarizing the assembly with the Scripture readings and encouraging a sensitivity to the liturgical seasons with attention to the environment and the music.

There is a fine line between education and liturgy; the best formation takes place when the two are seen as parts of one whole. Education both prepares the community for liturgy and takes place within the liturgy itself. In turn, a community that is knowledgeable and, as such, can encourage that community to go out into the world and continue the action of Eucharist enriches the liturgy. In many ways, this is the pinnacle of the work of faith formation.

With the disciples' recognition of the risen Christ, his work of instruction was done. In the words of Augustine, they had received that which they were: the Body of Christ. Liturgical formation for and through liturgy, empowers us to continue Christ's ministry. This is truly a momentous event. And it starts with sharing a meal.

*They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.*

It should come as no surprise to anyone involved in faith formation that the two disciples had little rest.

They were driven on by the energy and joy they felt in being called to testify to the Lord's presence. In this Gospel account, we see evangelization and conversion taking place simultaneously in Jerusalem and at Emmaus. Faith formation involves a similar cyclical dynamic: we evangelize in order to catechize or educate, and then go out again to tell others about the good news. A word of caution to those who think that by evangelizing, they may be "bringing faith" to the uninitiated: we arrive only to find that God is already there. Our task is to recognize and affirm the action of the Spirit in people's lives.

Our journey is far from over. Like the disciples who re-gathered in Jerusalem, we have many paths ahead from which to choose. Yet no matter which path we take, we move ahead with the firm conviction that Christ travels with

us and that ultimately, this is his journey. We gather strength and inspiration from the saints in our midst, while the fools bring the impossible into consideration. Let us remember to be grateful to both.

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## Questions for Reflection

1. A paradigm shift is not unlike conversion: it calls us to set aside the old ways of doing things and not resist the new. What are the areas for conversion in your faith formation? What can you let die, and what might you embrace for a more integrated approach to adult faith formation in
  - a. your personal life?
  - b. the local church?
2. What are the practices and life-patterns within which you can more intentionally encounter God? What needs to change in these? What opportunities have been missed?
3. How can the liturgical life of your church become the focus of adult faith formation, as well as faith formation for children and teens? What will be the points of resistance?
4. What support do you have for adult faith formation efforts? How can you take advantage of this support; or if it does not exist at present, what can you do to encourage support for adult faith formation?
5. How is lay ministry recognized and encouraged in your church? What methods of preparation are in place? What else may need to happen in this regard?

# Things We Know About Adult Learning

## 1. Things we know about adult learners and their motivation and retention.

- ♦ Adults are motivated to learn when *they* identify they have a need to learn.
- ♦ Adults learn best when they feel the need to learn and have input into what, why, and how they will learn. They perceive the goals of a learning experience to be their goals.
- ♦ Adults can be motivated to learn when the *benefits* of a learning experience outweigh their resistance.
- ♦ Adult learners can also be motivated by appealing to personal growth or gain.
- ♦ Adults use their knowledge from years of experience as a filter for new information and *don't change readily*.
- ♦ Adults learn best from their own *experiences*.
- ♦ An adult's experience is a filter that can function as a *catalyst or barrier* to learning something new.
- ♦ Ninety percent of what adults learn and retain in long-term memory is tied to previous knowledge.
- ♦ Adults like tangible *rewards and benefits* from training.
- ♦ Adults retain learning that they *discover* and forget much of what they are told.

## 2. Things we know about designing learning programs for adults.

- ♦ The learning experience should be life-centered, problem-centered, or task-centered.
- ♦ Preprogram assessment is important.
- ♦ Program design should account for learning-style differences among adults and incorporate a variety of learning methods which respect their varied learning styles.
- ♦ The learning design should promote information integration.
- ♦ Exercises and cases should be realistic and involving, stimulate thinking, and challenge the adults.
- ♦ Design should accommodate adults' continued growth and changing values.

- ♦ Feedback and recognition should be planned. Adults learn best when they have a sense of progress toward their goals and can see the results and rewards of the learning experience.
- ♦ Build-in transfer strategies to help adults apply the learning to the real-world.

## 3. Things we know about adult methods and the environment for adult learning.

- ♦ Some adults like some lectures. All lectures won't be liked by all adults.
- ♦ Adults like *small group discussion* and a variety of interaction with the instructor and other participants.
- ♦ Adults enjoy *practical* problem-solving. Adults want *practical* answers for today's problems.
- ♦ Adults learn best in a safe and comfortable environment. Adults learn best when the learning environment is characterized by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences. Adults appreciate breaks, which convey *respect* to the learner.
- ♦ *Practice* is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.
- ♦ *Assess* the learners' interest in your topic; don't assume interest.
- ♦ Adults *expect* assistance with technical problems.
- ♦ Adults hate to have their *time* wasted.

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