

WORKING WITH ADOLESCENTS

By Carol Stoica

"This is what the young people are really looking for: a friend, whose honesty they trust, who really accepts them as they are, and who, they feel, is in possession of some convictions and traits that are relevant to their needs."

Sophie Koulomzin

Our Church and Our Children

I was preparing for a new vocational position - teaching religion to freshman and sophomore girls in a Catholic high school. Through that academic year I learned how and why the qualifications and practices mentioned above are important in teaching adolescents and young adults.

Let's take them one at a time.

A friend: Being a friend involves mutual knowing and mutual caring. Can you be a friend to someone who doesn't want you as a friend? I think not. My students covered a wide range of acceptance/ rejection, complaisance / rebellion, openness/prejudice regarding adults in general. The younger students were generally more open and accepting; the older ones were more clique-ish, clannish, defensive of themselves and each other, at times even hostile. Part of this was do simply to my being an adult; part was due to the subject, which was our common meeting ground. They had some strong ideas about God and religion and anyone who might be trying to tell them anything about right and wrong. Being allowed to be a friend took time.

I tried to make clear my expectations and my interest in each student's well-being; I also expressed my hope and desire that each student learn to see religion as something integral and natural in her daily life. I tried to be open and honest and helpful in any way I could.

Trustworthy honesty: The difficulty here was that I was not known. I was not a family friend, not a relative, not of the same culture, not a member of anyone's parish - I was not even Roman Catholic, as most of them were. I felt that to gain their trust and confidence I had to make a special effort to be informed, open, honest, diplomatic, consistent, and mature. This, I thought, was crucial because my task - to lead my students to a better understanding and practice of their faith - was crucial. I had never before been in a position where I felt so essential. As teachers - whether we do it daily or once a week or occasionally - we need to be aware of our very special place in a young person's life. When you open yourself to true communication with a student, you can give

that person something otherwise unattainable. As adults it is easy and common for us to forget that a child's experience and resources (or lack of them) put limits on his abilities to understand and to act. For example, a child whose opinion is not valued or respected by his family members will not be eager or willing to share it in the classroom. How can he expect approval when he has never experienced it? This brings us to the next item.

Accepting them as they are: For most adults, this is truly a difficult order. My difficulty was that being their teacher, I eventually had the unhappy task of assigning grades for both their academic efforts and their conduct. A parent is in a different spot you want your child to be the best, the brightest, the most popular - how can you possibly accept shortcomings? How can we "deprive" these young people of our expert opinions, advice, and guidance? For my part, I tried as much as possible not to impose; I gave my opinions when I felt so strongly that I could no longer keep silent; I gave advice when it was requested; and I gave guidance as unobtrusively and inconspicuously as possible. I tried to keep in mind that listening is a valuable skill

In possession of convictions and traits that are relevant: You may, at this point, be wondering just what we were doing subject-wise in the classroom. The freshmen had one semester each of "Introduction to Christianity" and "Christian Ethics." For the sophomores, it was "A Study of the Sacraments" and "Old Testament." If you are in a church school situation and have some freedom in choosing your curriculum, taking into consideration your students' backgrounds, current needs and interests, your course might include combinations of the above topics. Be flexible - allow time for reviewing previous material, exploring new material, looking into questions and controversies that arise. Be a guide and help your students find what they are seeking.

In covering the factual aspects of the courses I tried to be on guard for misunderstandings or misinterpretations. It happened frequently that a student would state her opposition to some doctrine or practice, only to find that there really was no opposition because there was no such doctrine or practice. An example: one young woman stated that she could never go along with "praying to statues." She was relieved to hear that no one expected her to.

I hoped to give my students a sense of the reality and relevance of religion. Their lives, as those of most human beings, contained contradictions:

- ♦ Yes, the Bible is very important to my faith. No, I'm not sure what's in it; don't understand it, never read it.
- ♦ Of course I love God - and my fellow man. Why should I help her? She's not my friend.
- ♦ Yes, Catholics (Orthodox) should go to Mass (Liturgy) regularly.
- ♦ No, I don't go to church very often - I don't understand what's going on - I don't want to be a hypocrite.

That statement "I don't want to be a hypocrite" was repeated often enough to make a strong impression. These young women, concerning religion, had a very real, very common, and very understandable fear of being accused of hypocrisy. They wanted to understand, to be fully aware, to be able to fully defend before committing themselves to a cause or a belief. I had occasional success in convincing them that at times in order to understand you must allow yourself to experience; you can't fully comprehend water if you refuse to get your feet wet.

We took time, when feasible, to discuss relevant questions, personal situations, and concerns. Once every two weeks or so we took an entire class period for questions and discussion of these matters. They would submit their questions anonymously. The nature of God, church doctrine, suffering, death, sexual morality, family relations, and peer relations were popular topics. These questions were helpful in leading me to a better understanding of my student's needs. Each session usually brought two or three questions about my personal life. Some I chose not to answer and I didn't even try to explain my reasons. My reasons were that if, on the one hand, I said I did not or never had engaged in or committed certain acts or practices, my students might feel that I were adversely judging or condemning those who did or had. If, on the other hand, I admitted to these things, they might take my admission as permission or approval for their commission of it. Some questions I was unable to answer. Fortunately, there were people on the staff I could and did consult. At times we had some of these people as guest speakers. Our principal, a priest, spoke to the girls about confession; a lay faculty member spoke about marriage. A few days before each speaker's

scheduled appearance, the girls wrote and turned in topics and questions they were interested in hearing about or having answered. These aided the speakers in preparing their talks and me in scheduling future speakers.

As the year went on I succeeded to some extent in satisfying the requirements of my task. Based on my experience, I offer the following to anyone engaged in or embarking upon a similar task:

- Be open and honest and be prepared to be known.
- Be aware that whether you choose it or not, whether you like it or not, you will be teaching every second by your example.
- Do your best to accept your students as they are - each one is a unique and valuable human being.
- Take your work seriously - you and it are important.
- Know your subject matter as well as possible; be willing to do research on matters when necessary.
- Use parish, community, family resources, such as books, materials, and, above all, people - priests, choir directors, parish council members, altar servers, readers, engaged and married couples, mothers, fathers, children.
- Work for empathy: get behind your students' eyes. Find out what is on their minds, in their hearts. "Do what you can to answer their questions, erase their doubts, calm their fears."
- Try to insure that every student has his/her own personal Bible.
- Don't think that you are preparing these young people to be future parish members - they are parish members and just as essential as any parish member, young or old. Your job is to give them guidance and assistance in fulfilling that role. Do all you can to inform them about their church and parish community, give them experiences, arrange to have them attend social and organizational meetings, choir rehearsals, introduce them to people, let them see what people do in the parish.
- LISTEN.
- Be prepared to be challenged and rewarded.
- Have a good supply of humility, patience and fortitude on hand.
- PRAY.
- Share your successes and failures; recruit other interested adults: "This is what the young people are really looking for..."

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