

Youth, Values, and Inquiry

by Fr. J. Allen

The first requirement, almost a pre-requisite, for teaching teens or youth at any age, is a knowledge of their situation. One must know how a young person thinks and reacts in his world.

What is his situation? We must remember that these young people are not yet adults and are, yet, no longer children. They fall somewhere between. This awkward position creates a great psychological and spiritual strain; it is awkward because they are not really sure of where they are or in which world they belong. There have been many new books, in fact, which are devoted to just this area. The one that comes immediately to mind is *The Waiting Game* by Roy Fairchild, which is presently being reviewed by the O.C.E.C. and which shows, at once, how teens must keep this balance, and yet how to keep the balance is itself the problem.

If we can quickly scan the interests of youth during these years of dilemma, we see a strong emphasis on dating, sex, peer relationships- the whole question of priorities or even more, questions of tomorrow. Who will I marry? Who will be my mate? How will I live my life? And they are not protected from pressure to make such decisions. In sixth and seventh grades they are already being asked: What do you want to be? Decide now so that we can map your course of study. This is the pressure of American society! A younger child might answer in a rather light way — "... a fireman, a policeman" — but at this age it is already a very serious question. And then we have the question of drugs and the whole area of intense social interests; the war, racism, the rape of the environment. We must also remember that this is the very first generation that has never known a time when world annihilation was not possible. We talk about wars, World War II, the War of wars, and yet they were somehow fought "over there" — not here, and therefore not really present, at least, as a threat of annihilation. Now we live in the age of the atomic weapon — the push of the button, the nod of the head; the distance between the enemy and myself is a distance which allows me to escape having to look at the blood that flows from my enemy. I do not mean that one stops for the moment and consciously says. "Isn't it terrible. I can be wiped out tomorrow!"

This may indeed happen, but I am suggesting that it is more of an undercurrent of thought, something that lurks in the deep part of the conscious mind, or maybe even in the unconscious. Whatever the case may be, it is real and present. It touches their lives in a multidimensional way. Every problem that they face can be subsumed under this ever-present yet discreet condition.

Now, considering all this, i.e. their situation, their world, their reaction to all these stimuli, our greatest challenge, as the Church, is to teach values. What is involved when one asks how to teach values? How does one begin? I think so many times we start from the positive point of view. I realize that modern educational psychology says we should begin in a positive way; perhaps in this case, considering the great "humanitarian" trends of today, we can begin from the opposite approach. I am opting here for an approach that may even begin in a negative way. I do not mean that we should return to our churches and dictate, "Don't do this." or "Don't do that." Rather, my use of the word "negative" refers to the use of the concept of sin as a beginning point. Strange as that may sound, it makes sense. Our young people have an idea of what love is. I think they also know what life is. Although they may not have the maturity to see all the ramifications involved, their ideas of these "positive" qualities may be even truer than our own. First of all, if our preaching as priests and your teaching as teachers is not loaded with life and love, it will surely be ineffective. This is the fundamental concept of the Christian life.

But what if we indeed begin by teaching the concept of sin? I think it is very important that we realize that we cannot begin to teach the concept of sin from a point of view of law; i.e. that sin is only the breaking of a law. Instead, sin must be taught as the gradual breakdown of a relationship; a breakdown, an alienation, a separation, a real "split" between God and man, between man and man. Of course, this is the whole story of Adam, the biblical history of the "breakdown" in humanity that occurs when man decides to separate himself; "thus sin entered the world," as St. Paul tells us. I am sure that this is where we should be going if we begin with sin as a concept.

Now, if sin is this disturbance, this breakdown, its main focus is not on law, is not on "guilt"; we cannot use guilt as a threat, as a way of telling them to avoid sin; it will not work. The Church, in fact, more often than not, says the ways things should be done and does not preface its teachings with "You should not ..." She says, "Let us love one another ..." or "Let us stand aright ..." She speaks always with these "should" words; "Let us ..." She has, therefore, this natural inclination away from the use of guilt based upon some law, and instead emphasizes value based on "other." The disturbance is precisely between me and an "other"; just the opposite of "Let us love one another." That "other" may be God or may be man. The other may be the world, or rather, the loving of the world in order not to be imprisoned by it, in order to care for it, to make it God's world. We are obligated to teach this, Martin Buber knew this when he spoke of his "I and Thou." But the Church knew long ago, that if we speak about any law, it is the law of love for an "other." She emphasizes this before any law. "Let us love one another."

Now we see immediately the concept around which all values are centered: the Image Deo, the Image of God, which every man has and for which he deserves our care. Sin is the neglect of that image. This is why Christ said. "If you say you love me and not your brother, you are a liar!" Teens can understand this. They will react first to this before any law based on guilt.

The whole point is this: if we are speaking about law, we are speaking about a static thing. Laws are fixed. They are "don'ts." If we are speaking about love, we are speaking about a dynamic. Now, if sin is based upon law, then our understanding of love is static. But, if sin is based upon the breakdown of love, that love is understood as a working and dynamic relationship. Consequently, if one teaches value by guilt or law, there is no chance for love to work: no forgiveness, no change, no growth. Values established on love allows us all this. It gives to teens a tangibility, an action to be taken. Love means a love with "skin on it." Very often we quote things which speak about love "in general." For example, "God is love." But, although this is true, who understands it? It is a most difficult concept for teens to grasp. But love with "skin on it" is what the Apostles preached. This they can relate to. This exactness and specificity is what the Church means when she says, "Let us love one another that with one accord we may confess." And then the Creed: "I believe ..." How important this exactness is! We are not speaking about love "in general"! Before we even say what we "believe," before we even speak of the "unity of faith" we must love with this exactness—an exactness that says "one another." One can see how the Liturgy speaks! We cannot afford to miss this liturgical speaking.

The Agents of Value — Image

We must also be aware of the "agents" which are always in the air and always shaping the values of youth. Our youth, needless to say, are bombarded with agents which press upon them, which give to them what psychologists call their "self-image."

If we speak about agents, we must begin with television. Television dictates fashion, dictates bias, dictates the entire concept of the contemporary "self." Those involved in teaching value concepts to young people must simply be aware of the images that are in front of their students' eyes. Changes in the images of television, as this great medium, should guide changes in our teaching approach. For an example of how the television image has changed, let us look at the change in popularity of particular types of shows. On top of the popularity list for a while, was the "Dragnet" type of show: Joe Friday, legal, the code book type, the bad guy loses out. But now it's the "Mannix" type: not establishment, but moral: the bad guy still loses out. Now somebody can exist outside the law and still be moral. This is the new moral image! And the signs of it are all around. This takes us exactly back to the original point: don't tell them to be good because the law says so. First of all you cannot tell them that because they know that there are laws which are simply no good. Abortion, number one, based on American-British jurisprudence, they are told, is acceptable just because the law allows it. We should be happy that they find their criteria not in the law alone, but rather from a "sense" of what is moral. Sociologists have pointed out that television has entered four major stages. These stages have had a great effect on our "self-concept." They speak in terms of a "white wasp" stage; this is the Hopalong Cassidy image. All white was good-black was bad. Secondly, a "stereotype" stage; Amos and Andy best describes this-drinking beer and smoking cigars on the front porch. One belonged in a particular societal role. The third stage is similar to the second; the "regulation" stage-the doctor, the lawyer-Ben Casey, the hospital was the most romantic place to be. The fourth stage, which we are in today, is the "respect" stage-the Mannix type, of which I made mention. One can see how television has evolved and how the "self-concept has, in a like manner, evolved. Who knows what is next?

We have not said anything in terms of what is good or bad in these agents, the television types. But one that seems to be a danger is the emergence of the newest popular type: the group hero. What is popular today? The Mod Squad or Mission Impossible or The Doctors, etc. ... Here one sees the group. It used to be the individual hero, 007, or Cheyenne, the one that gave a certain concept of individuality.

This concept of individuality is missing today, and I am afraid that it is dangerous-even in the Church. I'm not speaking now in terms of community; I'm speaking in terms of collectivity — the concept of doing things as the group does them, regardless of what that "doing" involves. "All the kids are smoking pot, so I smoke pot." etc. This is what everyone is doing. This is what the "mob" is doing-and we all know the danger of a mob psychology. One belongs to a collective out of need only-need which very often removes any concept of oneself. But in community — in communion-one belongs out of need and love which never removes the concept of self. In the Church, one can be at once his "self" and part of the greater whole; "Let us commend ourselves and each other ..."

The point is that the contemporary image is a horizontal one — no one is to stand out. But there is a vertical image also, one which is a call to individuality. Remember, it used to be that television spoke to this need for individuality in the Cheyenne type. The appeal to "group action" does not have to be bad, but can be a potential danger when it does not allow for action as well.

There are also agents, right in the Church, which we may use to emphasize this need for individuality. It is unfortunate that we often neglect these agents which can combat the negative influences, such as this contemporary lack of individuality. First of all, iconography is an ever present form. Notice the icon of the Theotokos. The idea of individuality, of the Divine Spark, the Image Deo, as being within man is found in this solitary Byzantine figure. She answered the call, the voice from within, the *vocatio*, the vocation with which she was presented. She had to be an individual in terms of her society. That voice

from within is the Divine Spark of God. In a Byzantine icon there is no outside source of light. There are no shadows;; shadows are present only if there is an outside source of light. The light within, that which makes a person an individual is here emphasized. That may be why the halo around the Byzantine icon is never a saucer-shaped halo standing above the figure, but shaped in such a way as to express this "inner light." The Byzantine halo is connected to the body to emphasize this teaching. A Western picture, unlike the icon, has the light coming from without. There are shadows. There are many figures, rocks, stones, trees, etc. Unfortunately, we who are adjusted to Western art, have often missed the value of this solo Byzantine figure which emphasizes that which is given and planted in man at creation: the image of God. It is that image which gives us our "person," our individuality. We should not miss this agent.

Another agent is found right within the words of the Liturgy. We are constantly using the plural, i.e. the words "we" and "us." We say, "Let us pray to the Lord," or "Let us lift up our hearts." We should never forget this; it expresses the whole idea of fellowship. But we must never forget that the Liturgy expresses a sense of individuality within that fellowship. We say, "Pistevo," "I believe." "I" as a responsible person; "I" as an individual, who has received ordination by the laying on of hands at Baptism, who has been Chrismated as a person, as an individual, now state what I believe.

The point is that we must be able to find ways and agents which can tell our teens that they can step out from the negative and collective goals of their world. If they do not know this they will accept that one study showed to be the typical American societal goals. They may be good, but they have little with which to satisfy the soul: success, prestige, money, power and security. Not that these are unimportant or invaluable; we are speaking now of priorities. Christ said: Seek ye first the Kingdom of God. How important that word "first" is!

Ideas for Methodology

I think that we can turn our attention now to methodology. We cannot be all-inclusive here, but some ideas can be discussed.

Up until now there has been a "gap" between methods used in our public schools and those used in our Church schools. I am speaking now of the value of Inquiry. Very few of us, up until now, have tried to use or even turned our attention to this method of inquiry as a teaching method. We, more often than not, "talk at" students. And usually our talking at them is done in the context of reading and discussing. Both of these learning sources, i.e. reading and discussing, are valuable, but they are no longer enough. We ask questions such as: What is this or that? Yet, we can never forget that exciting learning, excited learning, begins with inquiry. And the whole Christian experience is exciting; beginning with the Liturgy and with the life of man; beginning with the concept that there is something wrong with the world, and that we as Christians cannot allow that "wrongness," which we call separation, to decay our souls. Excited learning means to inquire into that nature of reality. I'm not saying that we should not proclaim; we must proclaim as the Church. But inquiry is the most natural way to learn. A young child uncovers, touches, sometimes breaks things, but in doing so, he inquires. That which he discovers is more valuable than anything that can be told to him, for he discovers the reality of his world. The point is his: that if we as the Church, really believe in the reality of what we teach, we will not be afraid or insecure to allow our students to inquire. We talk about love or agape. We pray for the world or for the sick and the suffering, but what about visiting the old age home or the orphanage? Then we would be inquiring into the reality of those things for which we are praying.

There are many ways in which to work inquiry into our curriculum, but it takes imagination and effort. To begin with, just listen to the word of the Liturgy. They are pregnant with the possibilities for inquiring into the world.

Inquiry implies a number of skills. Some of them are: 1) observing, 2) analyzing, 3) inferring, 4) hypothesizing and 5) reaching conclusions or generalizing. Look at each of these skills. How can we incorporate them? Every lesson should include these basics to make it a lasting one.

Dr. Theodore Kaltsounis has published a list for using inquiry as a method. The article is entitled, "Swing Toward Decision Making" in *The Instructor* (April, 1971). Ask yourself the following group of questions. I've chosen those that seem to fit the O.C.E.C. curriculum best. The answers to all of the questions should be positive, if we are using inquiry as a method. This is a test for teachers to check themselves as to their use of inquiry:

What is most important is that values, which is where we began this discussion, are to be internalized so that they affect every situation. Inquiry, in turn, is the best way to such internalization. Our efforts must not only be placed upon specific values, but also upon the value process. We teach values in everything that we do and say, either explicitly or implicitly. In fact, many times our implicit teachings (those gleaned by our students from examples we set for them through our own behavior and attitudes) are the most effective.

We must never forget, in addition, that the Christian life is an on-going process, guided by the attitudes and values we hold — a life always developing and growing. Youth, values, inquiry: the people, the task, the method. This is a great challenge, but the reward belongs in the most gratifying category. For every student who, guided by a process of inquiry into the reality of a Christian life, who through examination of his own values and attitudes as they govern this life, decides to live a Christian life in its fullest sense — as an individual and as one of many fellow men in communion with God, this can only be one more giant step taken toward righting what is wrong with the world — toward making it more like what God's world should be.

1. Do you believe that students can learn by themselves and from each other? Do you guide them in this direction?
2. Is your classroom full of items that tend to excite students and arouse their curiosity to the point that they are anxious about learning?
3. Does the learning environment that you have set for your students extend beyond the limits of the classroom and into the outside world?
4. Does your teaching show that you are aware of differences in students? Do you provide a variety of avenues—reading, audio-visual, role-playing, outside experiences, etc. ..., for reaching the same objective?
5. Do you confront the students with, or assist them to ask, questions that go beyond repeating what they have read or seen? Are they stimulated to analyze, explain, and evaluate situations? Do you provide a variety of opportunities for them to apply what they are learning?
6. Do you allow students to suggest solutions to particular social problems and important issues that have not been resolved?