Do the Right Thing:
Forming Catholic Conscience in Children and Youth
Dr. Joseph D. White

Questions for reflection:
• When you think about the conscience formation of children and teens today, what concerns you most?
• What signs of hope do you see?

Chiune Sugihara
• Served as Vice-Consul for Japan in Lithuania 1939-1940
• Saved over 6000 Jews by issuing transit visas through Japan, risking his career and the lives of his family
• Proclaimed "Righteous Among the Nations" by the Israel in 1985

Some “–isms” that are pervasive in our society
• Relativism – truth is relative
• Individualism – “What’s in it for me?”
• Hedonism – “If it feels good, I’ll do it.”
• Deism – a detached, uninvolved God
• Minimalism – “What’s the least I can do?”

Happiness vs. Pleasure
• God has wired us to seek happiness.
• Happiness and pleasure are often two different things.
• Pleasure is a fleeting feeling that lasts only during the activity that produces it
• True and lasting happiness is found only in right relationship with Him, others, and self.

Decision-making and the brain
• Takes place in the frontal lobe; specifically in the prefrontal cortex
• Prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive functions
• Prefrontal cortex develops more slowly in children with ADHD
• Prefrontal cortex is not finished developing until early twenties

Moral Formation and The Divine Pedagogy

“Catechesis as communication of divine Revelation, is radically inspired by the pedagogy of God, as displayed in Christ and in the Church” (GDC, 143)

5 Aspects of the Divine Pedagogy
#1 – God’s pedagogy is invitational and person-centered.
An invitational, person-centered moral catechesis
• Be attentive to the unique needs of your learners
• Invite them to be their best selves
• Call out and nurture their gifts and talents

5 Aspects of the Divine Pedagogy
#2 – God’s pedagogy is incarnational.
Incarnational moral catechesis
• Christocentric
• Witnessed in the life of the teacher/catechist
• Saints as Heroes of the Faith
• Multisensory methodology

Multisensory methodology
• Acting out making good choices
• Movie/media clips
• Beatitudes Billboards
• Games
• Ten Commandments Tic-Tac-Toe
• Virtues/7 Deadly Sins “Who Am I” Game

Questions for reflection
• What saints are particular examples of virtue for me? How might I share these saints with my learners?
• How do I incorporate hands-on, active learning approaches to moral formation?

5 Aspects of the Divine Pedagogy
#3 – God’s pedagogy is communal and familial.
A communal, familial moral catechesis
• Emphasizes the common good (not the “greater good”) when making moral decisions
• Equips and engages parents and families in the process
• Assists students in forming and being accountable to a community
• Class guidelines/rules
• Community discussions

Involving Families
• Main point and “Ask Me Questions”
• Information sent home with developmental content, adult level content and in context applications.
Questions for reflection

- What are our current “class rules”? If they are not yet well defined, what would be appropriate guidelines for this age group?
- How do I let parents know what their children are learning and involve them in the process?

5 Aspects of the Divine Pedagogy

#4 – God’s pedagogy is structured, systematic and comprehensive.

- Structure of morality in the Christian life
- The three criteria of a moral act (CCC, 1750)
  - “Object chosen”
  - intention
  - circumstance
- Beatitudes, commandments, works of mercy

Structured, Systematic, Comprehensive

- Pay attention to developmental stages
- Build delay of gratification skills
- Teach problem-solving steps

Pope Francis on Developmental Stages of Moral Development:

“In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child’s age and abilities” (Amoris Laetitia, 273).

Moral Development

Kohlberg’s Stages

- Preconventional reasoning
  - punishment and obedience orientation
  - individualism and purpose
- Conventional reasoning
  - interpersonal norms
  - social system morality
- Postconventional Reasoning
  - Community rights vs. individual rights
  - Universal ethical principles

Pope Francis (correctly) Points to Delay of Gratification as Key in Moral Development

“…the habit of foregoing an immediate pleasure for the sake of a better and more orderly life in common, is itself a value that can then inspire openness to greater values” Amoris Laetitia, 264

Why is delay of gratification important?

Stanford Marshmallow Study (Walter Mischel)

- Longitudinal study begun in 1960 with 4 year olds
• 1/3 grabbed marshmallow within seconds (impulsive)
• 1/3 were able to wait up to 20 minutes (impulse controlled)

Results of the Stanford Marshmallow Study
• Related to academic success: Impulsive children’s average SAT scores in High School were 524 verbal and 528 math. Impulse controlled students’ average: 610 verbal and 652 math. Delay of gratification predicts SAT scores as well as economic status and better than parents’ level of education and is twice as good a predictor of later SAT scores than is IQ.
• Also related to juvenile delinquency (better predictor than IQ: Block, 1995)

1-2-3 Check
• What is the problem?
• What are my choices?
• Take the best action.
• Check and see: How did it work?

Question for reflection
• How can we teach the structure and guidelines of Catholic morality to children and youth at various ages and stages?

5 Aspects of the Divine Pedagogy
#5 – God's pedagogy is perpetual.
A Self-Perpetuating Moral Catechesis
• Teach goal-setting.
• It's OK question and challenge.

Risky Behaviors: Some interesting research...
• A recent, highly publicized study by Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong from University of Pennsylvania and University of Waterloo in Ontario (2010) helps us understand how to better steer adolescents away from risky behaviors such as smoking, alcohol use, and sex.
• Jemmott and colleagues demonstrated that programs for prevention of risky behaviors should not be fear-based, but are more effective when they are goal-focused, encourage critical thinking, and allow group discussion of the issues involved.

“A good ethical education includes showing a person that it is in his own interest to do what is right. Today, it is less and less effective to demand something that calls for effort and sacrifice, without clearly pointing to the benefits which it can bring.”
--Pope Francis, Amoris Laetitia, 265

“It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving.” Amoris Laetitia, 280
Questions for reflection

• How can we help our learners discover and listen for the voice of God in their own lives?
• How do I react to questions or challenges from my learners? What skills would help me react in a more productive way when challenged?

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