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HANDING ON THE FAITH

When You Teach in a Catholic School

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Liguori

Nihil Obstat:
Donald Miller, O.F.M.
Rev. Richard L. Klug
May 6, 2004

Imprimi Potest:
Fred Link, O.F.M.

Imprimatur:
Rev. Carl K. Moeddel
Vicar General and Auxiliary Bishop
Archdiocese of Cincinnati
May 11, 2004

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Cover and book design by Mark Sullivan

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Dunlap, Judith.

Handing on the faith : when you teach in a Catholic school / Judith Dunlap.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-86716-575-8 (alk. paper)

1. Catholic teachers—Religious life. I. Title.

BX2373.T4D86 2004

268°.82—dc22

2004008314

ISBN 978-0-86716-515-3

Copyright © 2004, Judith Dunlap

Published by Franciscan Media

www.FranciscanMedia.org

Printed in the United States.

Printed on acid-free paper.

13 14 15 16 17 5 4 3 2 1

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Faith Is Relational

Youngsters of this generation, probably more than any in recent history, need to be anchored in their faith, and vested with an invincible hope. They need to be certain of a loving God who will always be with them. They have to believe that God is more powerful than even death, and that nothing can separate them from that power and that love.

They also have to know that this great gift of love comes with certain responsibilities. In particular they are responsible for sharing that love and working for peace and justice in their homes, their classrooms, their cities, their world.

How do youngsters receive this faith? Actually it was their gift in baptism, and it's theirs for life. However, some have never experienced the faith with which they were graced. It's still just a spark waiting for some kindling. *Faith needs to be attended; it needs some nurturing if it's going to grow.* Attending and nurturing faith is the parents' and parish's responsibility, and if you're a Catholic schoolteacher, you also share in that responsibility.

Religion class is an important element in the faith formation process, but we also learn about God as we observe the world around us through science, social studies, and literature. The documents from Vatican II remind us that this is one of the primary reasons Catholic schools exist

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(*Gravissimum Educationis*, 28). Religion may be taught as a separate subject, but in a Catholic school faith learning happens throughout the day.

When Non-Christian Children Attend a Catholic School

You have the opportunity to introduce the Gospel and offer values-based formation and education.

Remember: Introducing and offering never means imposing Gospel values.

Church law requires that we respect the religious freedom and personal conscience of individual students and their families (*RDECS*, 6).

Worship and praise are not a Sunday-only occurrence. And religion is not something we pull out and put away to accessorize a particular outfit we are wearing. Our fundamental belief in a good God and God's universal plan for peace and harmony affect every aspect of our lives. The fundamental truths of our faith should be reinforced in every subject we teach, as well as every extracurricular activity we sponsor.

Faith isn't something that can be taught: It is caught. Faith is caught by being around people who believe—people who are willing to share their faith with words and through their actions. More than ever our young people need the company of faith-filled individuals. They need you, even if you are not used to sharing your faith, even if you are not certain about your own faith right now. Like every other formational process, growing in faith takes conscious effort and deliberate planning.

Dimensions of Faith Formation

There are two dimensions in the faith formation process: the horizontal and vertical. The vertical dimension is one's relationship to God explored and developed in prayer. The horizontal dimension is the relationships we have with God through the people around us. In the classroom the relationship of particular importance is teacher-student (*RDECS*, 109–112). Both the vertical and horizontal dimensions are equally important and when the interplay is balanced effectively, young people are more likely to internalize the Gospel message and make the faith their own. Without the horizontal dimension of personal relationships and the vertical dimension of a relationship with God, the faith we teach in our religion classes is purely an academic subject, easily dismissed and easily forgotten.

Horizontal Dimension

Christians know the importance of a one-on-one relationship with God, but we also know that we cannot find God alone. We believe in the incarnation, Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man. We know that our relationship to this incarnate God is fully dependent on all our other relationships. God in his goodness became one of us so that we could get to know him and become one with him. We find God in all people, in our inmost being, and we find God in the community.

Catholic schoolteachers can facilitate in all three of these areas. You can help young people develop healthy, trusting relationships with their peers. You can introduce them to the amazing self-discovery found in centering prayer. And you can help them experience the safety and comfort of Christian community. Each of these relationships will be

addressed in the pages ahead. However, there is no doubt that in the classroom the most important person-to-person relationship in the faith formation process is between student and teacher.

You are in a relationship with every student in your class. No matter the age of your students, no matter the subject you teach, you are an important part of their lives. You are a window to the adult world, the face of authority, their connection to the right pathway. You do not know and may never know how you have influenced the young people in your class, or even changed their lives. You just may be the teacher they will always remember.

Teacher-Student Relationship

We know that a classroom is made up of a whole variety of individuals, from young people glad to be there and eager to learn to other youngsters who are just putting in their time. Often teachers find themselves in situations that make developing a trusting relationship anything but easy.

Sometimes students, even in the primary grades, come to us already wounded and wary. They are quiet and guarded, or angry and aggressive. Often they were judged and labeled when they were very young. Year after year we see them live up to the negative perception that they have become all too familiar with. On some level they have already decided what role they will play in the classroom even before the school year begins.

Tips for Building Trust in Younger and Middle Grades

Help your students get to know you too by telling them what you were like when you were in their grade.

Bring in a picture of yourself at their age. Tell them what games you played, and what school was like. Talk about your friends, the concerns and fears you had.

Ask them to share the same information with you.

Tips for Building Trust in Junior and Senior High Grades

Spend time together helping the young adults in your class get to know you and each other by providing interactive activities that help them talk about themselves.

Contact your diocesan youth office to obtain resources for such activities.

Give adolescents time to journal their feelings and provide moments of time for adolescents to share or volunteer their thoughts, concerns, or feelings.

It can sometimes be difficult to find the goodness and unique gifts of our students, and even more difficult to help them see those gifts for themselves. It is not an easy task, but it is certainly not impossible. We know that with God's help and much patience, a teacher can have an amazingly positive influence on a student's life—if not all of his or her students.

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It is up to you to initiate relationships with your students that are built on mutual trust and respect. Your affirmations, encouragement, help, and friendly advice are all positive ways of building these individual relationships. When students trust their teacher they are more likely to listen, to ask questions, and to discuss situations of concern. You already know that when young people feel trusted, accepted, and respected it is easier for them to accept and respect others. You can further enhance these relationships of trust during the first couple of weeks of school by spending time getting to know your students. From the start of the school year, take a few minutes each day to catch up on the important happenings in their lives. By taking an active interest in their lives and allowing your students to get to know you, your classroom can become a community of trust and mutual respect—just the right environment to encourage faith sharing!

Witnessing Your Faith

Sharing your faith with your students can be very risky. Many of us are not accustomed to talking about God or telling others about our faith. However, if we want to hand on the faith to the next generation we have to take the risk of doing just that. The young people you teach have to hear you speak about God and the Church with conviction. You have to share your faith with your words, your tone of voice, the look in your eye. When they see your faith, faith becomes real for them. When they hear you pray, their prayers are validated. Next to their parents, you are the most important authority figure in their lives: Share your faith with authority. Be an emissary of Christ.

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All through the year talk about Jesus. Share his story as a narrative in your own words. Help them to see Jesus as a real person who experienced the sorrow of his father Joseph's death, and the pain of a friend's betrayal. He was someone who liked to spend time with his friends, and who laughed and cried just like they do. Let your young people know that Jesus loves them, and more than anything wants to be their friend. Convince them that he is someone they can absolutely count on.

Integrating Faith and Values in Secular Subjects

Take time when planning your social studies, science, or reading lesson to reflect on how the topic relates to Christian faith and values.

Use life's lessons—as well as the lessons learned from history, and illustrated through literature or the sciences—to point out the successes and failures of living according to God's plan.

Make sure that individuals are affirmed and treated with respect on the ball field as well as in the classroom. The same applications of faith are relevant for the after-school debate club, or Future Business Men and Women of America.

You need to help young people understand that Jesus's mission of peace and justice is meant to be their mission and their way of life.

Vertical Dimension

God reaches out to each person, inviting him or her to a close, intimate relationship. As a teacher in a Catholic school, your job is to help