



GROWING INTO FAITH...

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some insights into catechesis
with adolescents in the context
of contemporary society

In January 1983, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, published a short book by Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, Australian Director of CIL, and Brother Damian Lundy, FSC, England, in which these two friends present a distillation of some of the ideas they have explored in recent years with parents, teachers, priests and young people in several countries. We offer a brief outline of the book's principal themes. Each of its five chapters contains material for reading, reflection and discussion, offering some questions to be explored in groups.

PILGRIMS TOGETHER

The authors argue that "there are no simple, universally applicable answers to the important questions we are considering. As the twentieth century moves towards the twenty first, old and young alike are pilgrims together, and in our changing society and church it is no longer a case of confused young searchers asking their questions to which older, wiser believers trot out the obvious familiar answers to be found, in a more stable age, in the common catechism, or in the standard manuals of theology of a centralized, unchanging, uniform church." And they add: "In adopting this attitude, we believe that we are being faithful not only to our times but to the very nature of faith itself, and to the experience of the first Christian believers. We believe that people are called to make the journey of faith not by treading mechanically a predetermined path..." (vii).

GROWING INTO FAITH IN A CHANGING WORLD

This is an unfamiliar and challenging concept for many Catholics: its notion of faith is dynamic, not static, seen as a gradual personal response to the God who speaks, calls and saves. At the same time to grow into faith is a challenge to grow into church, for "I am baptized into the faith of the community, and, as I grow, I look to my fellow-Christians to be accepted, nourished, forgiven, healed, blessed, renewed, challenged and enlightened, so that I, in my time, with my brothers and sisters, may become the Good News which will save the world." (4)

This positive view of church is, sadly, often lacking in the young, because it does not correspond to their experiences. As infants they were baptized into a church and a faith, from which many have become estranged: some simply drift away, while others, hostile and disillusioned, choose consciously to reject the faith of their parents.

A key task for adults is to ask how our church can transcend the cultural forms assumed in its historical development so as to be relevant to this new society and especially to the needs of the young. This calls for an analysis of past memories and present experience, helped by the insights of contemporary poets, anthropologists, social commentators and theologians — of which the book offers a sprinkling.

LISTENING TO THE YOUNG

A study of American youth in 1974 pointed to five dominant "cries" of the young: the cries of "self-hatred" (arising from a conviction of personal worthlessness and failure), of "the psychological orphan" (after conflict at home), of "social protest" (against inadequacies and injustice in society), of "the prejudiced" (eg. inherited racial discrimination) and of the "joyous". Does the adult church *hear* these cries? and, if so, how do we respond to them? Many feel that teenagers are more inclined to reject "churchianity" rather than "Christianity", because they see the church as irrelevant and outdated: "God, tell me... Are you really counting on this old lady to invite young people to dance?" (27)

But we must take care not to equate rejection of *religion* with loss of *faith*. The distinction is important. Indeed, the authors argue, "such a rejection may sometimes be necessary if the young person is to become

emancipated from an image of God and his service which has never developed beyond the cultural conditioning of a family, church or society" (27).

FROM CONVENTION TO CONVICTION

We are familiar with the notion of "growing in faith", in the faith received as a gift of God in Baptism, which we are urged to hold on to or preserve. As an alternative to this rather static notion, the authors propose that we consider what is involved in "responding to the continuing call of the God whom we meet at the different stages of our lives — and not merely within the confines of one particular institution or system." So they speak of growing "INTO" faith, and explore the traditional image of life as a pilgrimage, suggesting that this has received new force from the stage-development theories of human psychology, proposed by pioneers like Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg. The American Methodist researcher and teacher, J.W. Fowler (with whom the authors worked during the summer of 1983), has applied the psychological insights of these pioneers to the study of faith-development. The findings of years of research are presented in Fowler's book, *Stages of Faith* (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1982). He shows how the faith of childhood, rooted in experiences associated with the family and social background, is challenged in our culture to grow beyond these boundaries through a process of personal struggle, critical reflection, reassessment and searching in the years of adolescence and adulthood. Older Christians, more secure and established in their faith, must not "lose faith" in the young but try to assist the process whereby the "turning away" of adolescence can become a "turning toward" a new and positive set of values and beliefs. Catechesis can help this process, but it can also hinder it.

The journey from the "received faith" of convention to the "sought after faith" of personal conviction is difficult and confusing in a society as complex as ours: it demands time, space, guidance, encouragement and patience, and a great respect for personal freedom. The concerned adult reader may best be brought to appreciate this by tracing the main stages of his own personal growth into the faith which is now his own, though he may need to be reminded that the society in which he grew up has changed radically in most countries.

"NO ONE MAKES THE JOURNEY OF FAITH ALONE!"

The final pages of the book are concerned to explore, in practice, how parents and teachers can respect the growing autonomy of young people, while trying to provide the conditions which appear to favour growth into a more mature personal faith. We are called to pass on the Christian heritage and to open up the richness of a concept of faith which invites the development of a trusting relationship with God which will prompt a person to act according to Christian values, not just to give assent to verbal formulae.

If we apply the Emmaus story (Luke 24) to our present situation, we shall see that *ministry* to the young may be much more important than formal classroom teaching — though there is a place for such teaching provided that it is done well. Sensitive ministry offers the challenge to commit oneself to Jesus as a disciple, while respecting the individual's freedom to respond to the call, as Jesus himself did (Matthew 19,16f.). In a constructive spirit, readers are invited to work with young people on a "re-designing exercise" on the church they would like to become — a church in which personal ministry could be more effective.

One central idea of this book is that not only do young travellers need the support from an older generation, but equally that older travellers need the vitality, the promise and the hope communicated by the young. The process of *accompaniment* at different stages of the journey is explored with reference to models of the faith-community opened up in official church documents, as well as in personal "dreams", and the authors discern some signs of hope, as they ask:

"So what about this vision of a living church, which is good news for a world often disillusioned by the failures and inadequacies of religious systems which seem to preach one thing while practising another? How does it compare with the sad old lady, dressing up for the hollow celebrations, while the young yawn with boredom? It's a long way off... And yet, in the last few years, there have been so many promising signs of a renewal of faith and of community in the most unlikely places, sometimes in the very centre of decay and hopelessness. Our age has its prophets, like every other. God still speaks, and his word has lost none of its power. It is a word many young people long to hear: 'I want the Church to show me the love and glory of God himself, so that, with God's help, the Church, society and the world will work itself out — through God's love,' wrote one seventeen-year-old, recently." (67)

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The book costs £2-95, plus postage. Copies from Darton, Longman, and Todd, 89, Lillie Road, LONDON SW6 1UD.