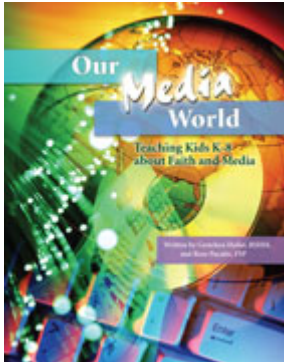


Lessons in media mindfulness

Gretchen Hailer Sr. Rose Pacatte | Apr. 3, 2010



The following is an excerpt from Our Media World: Teaching Kids K-8 About Faith and Media (Pauline Books and Media, 2010) by Sr. Gretchen Hailer, a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, and Sr. Rose Pacatte, a Daughter of St. Paul. The authors, both longtime media literacy experts, offer catechists, teachers and parents strategies for introducing children to media mindfulness.

Catechists and religious educators are in a unique position to bring the contemporary dynamic of pervasive and persuasive media into the religious education arena. This is because faith and life inform each other and belong together. At the same time, the believing community is faced with many challenges in attempting to integrate faith and media in everyday life. We compete for the time and interest of our students. Increased technological sophistication is required for classroom credibility, and many of us are aware that youngsters often know more about operating the remote control than we do.

Sometimes classroom technology is not available to catechists, or it is too expensive for the program or parish to provide. Yet the principles of media literacy education and media mindfulness can be applied in every learning space, using ordinary media that are already all around us. The photos in religion textbooks, magazines, newspapers, advertisements -- even cereal boxes and other product packaging -- that teachers or children bring to class offer practical and easy places to start. ...

No matter what their age, we are called to honor our students. We are also challenged to enter into respectful dialogue with them about the information and entertainment media products they consume. This respect is necessary not only because children enjoy media, but also because they often like media for reasons different from our own. Respect for the opinions of others, including children, is called for because no two people interpret the same media production in the same way. It is important to keep in mind that any negative attitudes on the part of teachers toward media productions and student media consumption only serve to block conversation and effective teaching.

Although sometimes it might seem better to turn off the television for a week, or boycott a particular program or movie, these strategies have limited educational value or lasting economic impact. Ratings are useful as information for guidance, but many adults are not aware of their actual meaning. Electronic devices or so-called V-chips for television in homes, while perhaps effective with very young children, are also of limited value, especially if used without parental interaction. Soon enough, children will figure out the passwords, go to a

friend's house to watch TV, or go online -- without the benefit of parental guidance.

Without parental involvement in their media experiences, children are deprived of a rich opportunity to learn or begin to internalize their parents' values. Children need to develop moral reasoning and the critical thinking skills necessary to make healthy media choices.

Then, once they make a choice, children need their parents' input through conversation, questioning, and good example to find and construct meaning about life and faith.

Children benefit from knowing why their parents change the channel or won't take them to a tween concert because learning what motivates their parents' decisions is how they learn the values of their parents or caregivers. This means that parents and teachers -- first and foremost -- need to be aware of and be able to articulate the values that guide their own lives and how these values relate to their media choices.

Creating media mindfulness is not an easy task. Some teachers, catechists, parents and clergy think entertainment and information media do not have a place in the classroom because the focus of religious instruction and formation is the content of the faith. It can seem to them that media contradict this end. Yet the Incarnation, Jesus' becoming a human being like us, reminds us that our life in God is rooted in the world around us. Catechesis about the media and using appropriate media in catechesis are valid and effective ways to help children deepen their lives with God -- one of the key goals of catechesis.

Although media are gifts of God, they are not always used to reflect what is true, good, and beautiful. Media literacy education and media mindfulness can teach the skills children need to begin telling the difference. The storytellers of tomorrow, the media makers of tomorrow, are in our pews, living rooms and classrooms today. What better reason, then, to incorporate media mindfulness into our religious education curriculum? Developing media literacy and media mindfulness skills is an educational and faith-formation imperative for the 21st century.

If our teaching about God, the church, the human person and the world is faith-filled, hopeful and loving, these attributes will color everything we teach. This is true regarding media mindfulness in a particular way, because often people believe the church has a negative view of the media. This is not the case, however, as the consistent teaching of the church shows. The church teaches that the media are gifts of God that have great potential for good, although they frequently carry risks. The church advises wisdom over fear and, rather than flight, suggests engaging the modern world through critical awareness. How we teach is what we teach.

[Sr. Gretchen Hailer, who has been involved in catechesis and media education for more than 30 years, and Sr. Rose Pacatte, director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles and *NCR's* regular movie reviewer, previously coauthored the 2007 book *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media*. The above excerpt is reprinted with permission of the Daughters of St. Paul.]

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