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Educating young people to be prophets

Kate Childs Graham | Sep. 9, 2010

I had the opportunity recently to sit and talk with several young activists of various faith traditions. When I asked them what the biggest problem facing young people today is each of them replied unequivocally: ?Education.?

I?m not sure why this surprised me, but it did. I reflected on the education I have been privileged to receive throughout my life and acknowledged that many other young people don?t have such a privilege. I also started thinking about the gaps in my own education, including my religious education.

I had a fairly run-of-the-mill Catholic upbringing. I went to public school, so I got my religious education at home and at church. I attended religious education classes every Wednesday evening at our parish. I went to church every Sunday and daily during Lent. I remember memorizing prayers, getting a star next to my name and reading Bible stories. But that?s about it -- a small step up from the Baltimore Catechism [1]

Sure, I also learned about loving God, loving my neighbors and honoring my parents, but I didn?t learn about those other core tenets of our Catholic faith. I didn?t know what makes Catholicism different, what makes me Catholic. It took hours of research as a young adult to uncover that answer.

When a friend first told me about primacy of conscience [2] I honestly had a hard time believing her. I mean, if it is such an important part of our faith, why was it never mentioned in religious education or during a homily? And why does it seem the church hierarchy wants us to follow it blindly? Yet, there it sits, a key element of the Catholic faith.

And then there?s Catholic social teaching. [3] Not until I took a course on it in college did I learn about the church?s incredible work and ideology on social justice. I was in absolute awe. What baffles me is why we wouldn?t put this front and center in the education of young Catholics. We should be shouting CST from the rooftops.

Catholic social teaching and the primacy of conscience are two of the many reasons I remain Catholic. I?m afraid if all I knew about Catholicism was what I learned in religious education and at Sunday Mass I would have left the church by now. I?m sad to think that the reason so many young people are leaving the church is because they haven?t gained enough knowledge about Catholicism and therefore feel powerless.

I won?t speculate as to why there is a lack of religious knowledge among young Catholics. But I will say that I?m not alone in wanting more. In a poll of Catholic millennials carried out by the Knights of Columbus, 65 percent said they were very or somewhat interested in receiving more education about our religion. And, of course, we can?t forget that the Second Vatican Council prioritized the education of the laity.

We owe it to ourselves and to Catholic children to truly educate them about the Catholic faith. Followers will always do just that -- follow. We need to help young people become leaders and prophets. We need to give them knowledge so that they have the power to lead and bring justice to our church.

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