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Getting back to basics in math and faith formation

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NCR Today

The province of Manitoba is introducing a new "back to basics" mathematics curriculum this fall for kindergarten to eighth-grade students. Apparently, there are too many young adults unable to make simple calculations without the aid of a calculator. According to the CBC, the new curriculum "strikes the right balance between developing math skills, procedural thinking, conceptual understanding and problem solving to ensure students are getting a solid foundation in math." It's about time.

Our five children were in the public school system from 1988 to 2009. During these years, we saw many "newer and better" curriculums come and go. Spelling skills and correct grammar were replaced with an emphasis on free-flowing creativity. Memorizing multiplication tables was replaced with grouping buckets of blocks. Students were used as guinea pigs, and we are now reaping the consequences.

Faith formation has suffered from the same pedagogical pendulum swings. As a baby of the Second Vatican Council, my childhood began with a Baltimore Catechism style of rote memorization. We regurgitated answers to questions and accuracy was rewarded with a holy card. In the 1970s, religious textbooks were replaced with craft supplies and Simon and Garfunkel albums. God was no longer a scary "Supreme Being." He was now imagined in butterflies and rainbows.

Pendulums choose either/or, rejecting what lies at the opposite end of the arc. Wisdom usually lies in the equilibrium of the middle.

Effective formation requires the use of head, heart and hands. With math, you must spend the mental energy to acquire the basic skills, for they are essential tools. Critical thinking requires creativity and pondering. Knowledge reaches its goal and greatest satisfaction when we are able to apply it to life in concrete and effective ways.

The same is true in faith formation. Yes, we need to get back to the basics. We need a solid doctrinal foundation, but it must be more than just regurgitating catechism lines. A tidy pile of holy cards for correct answers does not a Catholic make! We need to know what we believe, but we also need to engage the heart in prayerful pondering and contemplation so we can love what we believe. And we need to make that connection between faith believed and prayed and faith lived in right and just action.

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