

THE INTERPLAY OF “THE FRAMEWORK”
AND ATTEMPTS AT FORMATION OF
CONSCIENCE IN HIGH SCHOOL
THEOLOGY CLASSES

by

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ABSTRACT

Catholic high schools have a reputation for providing quality education, and preparing students to go to college. However, are Catholic high schools doing an effective job in teaching Catholic theology? This research attempts to answer that question by providing the history of the Framework, which is the document that Catholic high schools currently use to create theology curricula. The study also explores the benefits and disadvantages of the Framework, as well as provides examples of effective teaching methods. In conclusion, this research finds that the Framework is ineffective in classrooms because it does not engage students with their faith, and may cause a generation of Catholics to be lost. As a solution to the ineffectiveness of the Framework, this study proposes a three-part prologue to improve the Framework.

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INTRODUCTION

Thousands of parents choose to send their children to Catholic school every year. Whether the reason is a religious one, or the perceived better education, it is hard to deny that students are increasingly attending private schools (Ghose). Many studies have been conducted regarding whether Catholic students outperform their public school peers academically; however, there is limited literature focusing on the internal religious education offered by Catholic schools. If Catholic schools are known for their academics, should they not also be known for strengthening Catholic faith and identity?

Catholic schools base their religious curriculum on the *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework: For the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age*, 2007. The Framework, as it is colloquially called, provides an outline on which schools are to base their religious education classes. These classes are meant to provide a foundation for students to grow in their faith while they critically think through Catholic dogma. The Framework was written in 2007 during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI. Before becoming pope, Benedict served as the prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, an office known for its strict promotion of Catholic doctrine. It is no surprise, then, that when the Framework was published, the majority of its content focused on instructing students with doctrinally correct information, as opposed to creating experiential learning opportunities in the classroom.

This study will provide the history and purpose of the Framework as well as the current implementation of the Framework across Catholic high schools. After providing the historical foundation for the Framework, this study will analyze the viewpoints of those who believe the Framework is ineffective and those who favor the Framework.

Preliminary suggestions to the Framework will be explored, as well as studies done regarding the psychology of the high school mind. These studies will give insight to the best teaching methods for high school students, as well as provide reasons for why the Framework may not be effective. I will also explore the challenges teachers may encounter in the classroom when discussing faith formation with students, especially in the context of media brain washing and information overload. National trends about young Catholics will also be explored, as to better explain why young Catholics are choosing to leave the Church.

As part of this research, I arranged interviews with two Catholic high school teachers from a local Catholic school. I also had the opportunity to dialogue with Dave Cushing, a Catholic scholar who primarily focuses on Catholic faith formation in high schools. The participants answered questions about the effectiveness of the Framework, as well as the weaknesses of the Framework. All three interviews were divided into three themes, and analyzed in order to provide further insight on the challenges within the classroom.

The purpose of this research is to propose reforms to the Framework, so that its effectiveness in Catholic high school classrooms is improved. Without such reforms, I theorize that a generation of Catholics is at risk of being lost.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Framework and How it Works

The Framework was created by the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and unanimously approved by the full body of the USCCB in November 2007. According to the

introduction of the Framework, its purpose is to “guide catechetical instruction of young people of high-school age wherever and however it takes place” (USCCB, 3). The Framework is not meant to be a pre-written curriculum, but instead, it is meant to offer guidance for publishers in the creation of material as well as guidance for schools in the creation of their curricula. The Framework is designed to shape a four-year, eight-semester course of catechetical instruction, while also leaving room for two religious electives. Normally, the electives should be offered during the student’s third or fourth year. Schools are encouraged to follow the sequence that the Framework provides, as each class should build upon the previous class. The themes provided by the Framework are discussed in sections, and each section includes references that are taken from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, scripture, and the documents of Vatican Council II.

The themes provided by the Framework include:

1. The Revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture,
2. Who is Jesus Christ?
3. The Mission of Jesus Christ (The Paschal Mystery),
4. Jesus Christ’s Mission Continues in the Church,
5. Sacraments as Privileged Encounters with Jesus Christ; and
6. Life in Jesus Christ (USCCB, 5).

In addition to providing a guide to doctrinal content, the Framework also includes answers to possible questions that students may have during the lessons.

During the eight years following the creation of the Framework, many began to question how it would work. While the Framework was supposed to be a guide for publishers to create new textbooks, this process has become a slow one due to the nature

of publication. Few texts have actually been published according to the Framework guidelines, and without published materials, teachers are questioning how they are supposed to implement the Framework in their classrooms. According to the USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education, only 64 percent of the 97 dioceses responding have high school curricula for religion (Raiche, 30). Of that 64 percent, only 15 percent currently implement guidelines based on the Framework; 10 percent have revised their curriculum based on the Framework but have not implemented these revisions; and 45 percent are in the process of adapting their religious guidelines (Raiche, 30). With such a small percentage of schools currently implementing the Framework, the question remains of how effective the Framework is for Catholic education.

Criticism & Support of the Framework

Although the Bishops adopted the Framework unanimously, the Framework has not received unanimous praise among Catholic scholars. The Framework has been criticized for its focus on doctrine, and its lack of opportunity for discussion in the material. Critics argue that the authors of the Framework had little experience of working with high school students, and are out of touch with the best way to teach these students. On the other hand, those who support the Framework say that it is too early to criticize the Framework. They believe that the Framework cannot be evaluated until more time passes and there is greater implementation. Regardless of whether one side is correct or not, it is evident that the debate about the effectiveness of the Framework is not one that will go away soon.

William O'Malley is a priest who has been teaching Catholic theology for 43 years. In his article, "Faulty Guidance," O'Malley argues that the Framework is

ineffective because the authors have little to no experience working with teenagers. He asserts that the individuals who wrote the Framework are theorists and administrators that are out of touch with the way that high school students behave. According to O'Malley, the Framework is academic theology that does not reflect the way Jesus originally taught: via stories (O'Malley, 14). Instead of asking why the Church is not engaging or relevant to teens, the Framework assumes that students taking the classes have an ingrained faith. O'Malley explains that this could not be further from the truth as there are fewer and fewer students who are active participants in their parishes and fewer families that are passing down the faith. Because of the irrelevant and abstract curriculum, the students are unable to engage with the Catechism. Since the Framework is not engaging, the syllabi that have been created out of the Framework are more focused on knowing about God as opposed to knowing God (O'Malley, 14). Many students already question the teachings of the Church, and so one is hard-pressed to think that they are going to engage with topics such as "Sacraments as Privileged Encounters with Jesus Christ" (O'Malley, 15). By the time students begin to engage with the topics taught in the Framework, there is little chance that teachers will be as convincing as the media is. High school students today are more exposed to deaths, in an abstract way, than any previous generation, and therefore the fear of hell is not as imminent. The Framework presumes that students have faith, awareness of the transcendent, or even appreciation of altruistic values, and this is a false presumption.

O'Malley suggests the following provisions that would mold the Framework in a way that would better serve both teachers and students:

1. Heighten awareness of the miraculous order of the universe,

2. Develop a familiarity with centering prayer,
3. Demand a rough understanding of epistemology to study opinions,
4. Through the legends of various cultures, grasp the universal-bearing values of stories,
5. Foster an awareness of brainwashing by the media,
6. Grasp the difference between the self-serving of the world and the self-giving of the kingdom, and
7. Understand that morality is being human—Christianity goes further and forgives before forgiveness has been earned (O'Malley, 16).

For instance, teachers could expose students to different myths from around the world, and ask students to identify reoccurring themes throughout the literature. Once those themes have been identified, students could compare those themes to Catholic myths and see the similarities between other traditions and the Catholic Church. By allowing students to make comparisons with other traditions, students are able to see the universality of faith and understand connections with other cultures. In other words, O'Malley proposes a shift in emphasis from the Framework's knowledge-only style to experiential learning.

In his article, "A Sturdy Framework," Alfred McBride responds to O'Malley by agreeing with his feelings towards the Framework, but argues that the Framework should not be dismissed due to its shortcomings. Although the Framework does not have stories in it—a major criticism by O'Malley—the Framework is based on the greatest story of all: divine revelation (McBride, 16). The Framework is meant to only be a framework, and to assume that it is meant to do more is to misunderstand its purpose. The

introduction of the Framework explains that it is the responsibility of publishers and teachers to add the details to doctrines and lessons, as they are not fully developed by the Framework. Although O'Malley criticizes the rigorous theological academia of the Framework, McBride argues that theology classes should be as demanding as other courses (McBride, 17). If students are expected to spend hours trying to understand materials like physics and calculus, students should also be expected to tackle difficult theology in their religion classes. McBride is hesitant to claim that the Framework is not working the way it should; he explains that publishers and teachers should be allowed enough time to implement the Framework before its effectiveness is dismissed (McBride, 18). While it may take time to produce the appropriate material from the Framework, we should not diminish the importance and necessity of the Framework.

The Mind of the High School Student

The debates discussed above take place within competing views of the development of high school-age adolescent. When speaking about the psychological stage of the high school mind, one must be careful to note that the high school mind is still in the process of developing. Because the mind has not fully formed yet, high school students may not have reached full maturity and may not be able to make adult-like decisions. However, this can also be a positive attribute of the high school mind. High school students, and teenagers in general, have not formed bad habits and are not fully set in their ways (Stoltzfus). The malleability of the mind works in the favor of educators who interact with these students because students are more likely to be open to new ideas (Tokuhama). High school students have reached an age where they are mature enough to have thoughtful conversations that may challenge their beliefs, and are at a stage where

they can respond to these challenges. Furthermore, studies have shown that high school students learn and retain more information from classes that are based around discussions, not lecture (Northern Illinois University). Students that are given a personal stake in a discussion are more likely to understand the material than students who are asked to read a book or analyze a text (UC Davis). The reasoning behind this may be that when students are asked to develop their own answers, as opposed to reading from the text, they are more likely to remember why they arrived at such answers. Discussion based classes also rank higher in providing students insight into their beliefs and ideas (UC Davis). Although the trend of discussion-based classes originated in colleges, more high schools are beginning to implement this classroom structure in classes such as theology and philosophy, so that students can begin to think outside of their traditional box of ideas (PLATO).

Teachers today face students who are schooled in the scientific method and have only a vague understanding of the supernatural. Supernatural ideas have been molded by sci-fi movies and stories. As Brad Rothrock explains in his article, "God and the Teenage Mind," far too often teachers assume that students know what the term "God" means (Rothrock, 12). If groundwork is not provided for students, then students will always find learning about God pointless. Current media trends downplay the role of religion, so without a faith foundation, students are more likely to follow popular culture and ignore learning about God. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton write in their book, *Soul Searching*, that adults must have confidence in teaching students about their faith and traditions (Rothrock, 12). By making theology as challenging a subject like physics, students may spend more time analyzing and understanding the meaning behind

theology. Teachers should not shy away from using analogical language when speaking of God or having students read philosophers (Rothrock, 11). A hallmark of the Catholic Church is the link between faith and reason and if we do not expose our students to this link, then we are failing to teach them the traditions of the Church (Rothrock, 11).

Rothrock concludes that classes should not only focus on the philosophy of God, but rather also have personal and loving stories of God's grace. If we want to engage this generation, we must give them the ability to reason through their faith (Rothrock, 13).

Following suit in the conclusions of Rothrock, Thomas Baker writes that the only solution to waning Church involvement is to focus more on the "kerygma" of the faith as opposed to doctrinal and moral pronouncements (Baker, 32). Kerygma is the active preaching of salvation through Jesus Christ (Merriam-Webster). According to surveys, many young Catholics are dissatisfied with the Church's teaching regarding both premarital sex and birth control (Baker, 33). If we continue to focus only on doctrinal pronouncements, then youth may not be willing to hear the message of the Church. Baker analyzed the book, *Young Catholic America*, and its findings regarding the participation of young Catholics: half of young people raised by liberals stop going to mass entirely; meanwhile, a quarter of those raised by traditional Catholics have also stopped attending mass (Baker, 32). In the study done by *Young Catholic America*, 7 percent of young adults identify as practicing Catholics, while 27 percent say they are disengaged and no longer feel religion is important (Baker, 33). According to *Young Catholic America*, the church has not instructed the youth in a way that is unified, lucid, and authoritative. Bakers believes that, unless there is a widespread commitment to going to back to the

original message of the Church, even fewer youth will be willing to hear the message (Baker, 34).

Catholic Instruction

NCEA and Catholic Relief Services commissioned the study, “Living Faith, Loving Action: Catholic Social Teaching in the Secondary School” in 2006. The survey is meant to see how successful secondary schools are in articulating their Catholic identity and passing on the faith to students. According to the data collected by NCEA, Catholic social teachings are at the forefront of Catholic instruction (Scalise, 38). Principals were most likely to praise their own school; meanwhile, teachers who taught Catholic social teaching were the least enthusiastic about the school’s accomplishments. What this means is that the administration is content with the progress the school is making, but educators that are in direct contact with students are not satisfied with the programs implemented.

In 73 percent of Catholic high schools, a course on Catholic teaching is required and 20 percent of schools offer no courses regarding this topic (Scalise, 38). All schools reported offering volunteer opportunities to put into action the church’s social teachings, and 80 percent had mandatory volunteer hour requirements (Scalise, 39). Respondents rated the schools highly in school-wide liturgies and prayers, school mission statements’ and student retreats. However, schools scored poorly in recognition of faculty work on Catholic social teaching and recognition or awards for student work in Catholic social teaching. Students and faculty alike ranked dignity of the human person, racial equality, and the “common good” among topics that are most important to know and understand. They similarly ranked subsidiarity, scriptural sources for Catholic social teaching and

global solidarity as less important (Scalise, 39). NCEA also discovered that the least important topics are the least understood topics. The study concluded that there is room to grow in the schools' social teachings. More than anything, this study shows that Catholic schools are not providing students with enough engaging and experiential learning opportunities.

The Church Yesterday and Today

Many people have been critical of the style of catechesis that emerged after Vatican II, but not all. In the article, "That '70s Church: What it Got Right," Cathleen Kaveny reflects on her experience with the catechism and the way she was taught her Catholic faith growing up. She is part of the post-Vatican II generation that is stigmatized as receiving trivial and non-substantive education. Her church lessons included making banners about feelings and sharing, and although she agreed for some time that her education was to blame for the decline of faith, she has come to realize that this is not true (Kaveny, 13). Kaveny explains that the activities she did in class were not trivial and included substantial content. To blame the catechesis as the reason for why the Church is failing serves only to enforce the polarization in the Church that one ministry or another is to blame for lack of religious participation. Kaveny argues that the root problem is that "Catholics didn't have—and still don't have—a way of dealing constructively with substantial and irreversible changes in both the church and culture" (Kaveny, 13). While some Catholics may argue that students in the 70's were not sufficiently drilled with objective, impersonal, and timeless propositions, Kaveny defends that the emphasis on personal development and moral consciousness stemmed from historical events (Kaveny, 14). The events of World War II and the Holocaust left Catholics appalled and

emphasized the need for cultivating responsible men and women. This is the reason for why education in the 70's was greatly focused on personal development and faith relations. The new emphasis on doctrine found in current curricula is the antithesis to previous teaching methods, and is not effective in cultivating faith. Kaveny concludes that the only solution for declining church participation is to “teach young people how to think and pray within the context of a tradition that is not exempt from historical development and change” (Kaveny, 14). She suggests that teaching methods should be reverted to emphasize personal development and moral consciousness.

Dave Cushing wrote a response to Kaveny's article, agreeing with her observations. According to Cushing, publishers are focusing more on cramming more doctrinally correct content as opposed to meaningful lessons. Cushing also disagrees with Young Catholic America that Catholics are disengaged because of a lack of “unified, lucid, and authoritative instruction” (Cushing). Cushing believes that it is not religious education that is failing our generation—it is the wider church. The Church is now more grounded in word and sacrament than devotion and duty. Without engaging members of the church, faith and attendance practices (such as mass attendance) will remain in decline. Cushing is optimistic, however, that new engagement in the Church will occur thanks to those who are mesmerized by Pope Francis, his work, and his relatable message (Cushing).

INTERVIEWS

For the purpose of this research, I followed an iterative process to identify themes present throughout the three interviews. The three themes chosen out of the interviews are 1. Curriculum and the classroom, 2. Faith formation, and 3. Discussion topics. The

interviews were conducted both in person and via email, depending on what was most convenient for the participant at the time. Each participant willingly provided information about their experience in teaching Catholic theology, as well as their opinion of the Framework. The interviews provided insight as to what the Framework looks like in the context of classrooms and churches, so that my theories could be better founded. For privacy purposes, the names of the participants have been changed in the analysis of data.

Curriculum and the Classroom

Since the Framework is meant to be a building block set for teachers to create their curricula, I asked the participants about their experience creating curricula and how they felt the Framework affected their curricula. All of the participants discussed to a great length about the formation of the curriculum and how effective they felt the curriculum to be. In this section, I was primarily interested in gathering a better understanding of the formula that teachers must use in creating their curricula, and if there were additional criteria that teachers had to meet when choosing classroom materials. I was also interested to see how the new published material was affecting the classroom teaching, and if teachers felt pressured to change their books after the Framework was implemented. Throughout the conversations, I gathered information about the formation of the curricula, the materials used, and the effectiveness of these combined.

Mr. King, a high school scripture teacher, begins the conversation by explaining that the curriculum used in his classroom is based on the Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age, referred to here and known generally as the Framework. He explains that it is

critical for all curricula to be aligned with the teachings of the Catholic Church and the Framework restricts flexibility on the curricula. Since the Framework does not prescribe which textbooks to use, the responsibility of choosing material is primarily on the teacher who is teaching the specific course. Mrs. Ramsey, a high school Catholic morality teacher, echoed Mr. King and explained that teachers are very concerned with identifying textbooks that contain the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* declaring that they are free of moral or doctrinal error. Mrs. Ramsey explains that having the liberty to choose the textbook gives teachers ownership of the material, while also ensuring that they are choosing material appropriate for their classes.

When it comes to appropriate material, teachers must be very conscious of choosing both books that will “speak” to students in meaningful ways and that will be affordable to families. “We look to be judicious in choosing books,” Mr. King explained, “We want something that students will learn from but also something that will complement the materials being used in other classes. If a textbook does not meet the needs of our students over time, then it is important for us to reevaluate the effectiveness of that book.” The income of families varies for students, and so teachers must take cost into consideration so that students are able to afford all necessary materials.

Mrs. Ramsey expressed that working within the Framework can sometimes be difficult as many students become disengaged during the lessons. “I do feel like we teach students to know about God, as opposed to knowing God,” Mrs. Ramsey says, “However, I do not know if this is the fault of the Framework. With so many diverse students in the classroom, it can become difficult to teach students to know God. We respect all religions and traditions, yet we also expect all students to be open to the teachings of the Catholic

Church. This juxtaposition of student [identity] versus mission leaves us in a situation in which it is hard to teach students to know God.”

On the other hand, Mr. King feels that the Framework is vital to the function of schools and believes that real-life teachings should come from his own behavior. “The Framework is meant to be an outline for us, and as a teacher, I feel responsible for living out the Catholic lifestyle and that is the best way that I can engage students in the material.” Without the Framework, Mr. King fears that mistakes may be made in creating curricula and, therefore, the teachings of the Church would not be passed faithfully.

While Mr. King and Mrs. Ramsey were able to provide their view on the curriculum used in Catholic schools, Dave Cushing provided his outsider perspective on the curriculum requirements. According to Cushing, after the Framework was created, textbook publishers began including more material and vocabulary from the Catechism, whether or not it was either age or pedagogically appropriate. The publishers sacrificed the pedagogically useful “shared praxis” in order to fit material within the Framework. The shared praxis that Cushing refers to is a three-part process. The process began by asking the student to identify his or her personal experience (either positive or negative). The second step was to examine how the tradition (scripture and doctrine) addressed this experience. The third step was to examine how, based on either the challenge or affirmation of tradition, one might live one’s life differently. The new methods inundate students with information as opposed to allowing students to discover their own faith and path. Cushing believes that the shared praxis approach was more effective because it helped the student in an age-appropriate way to identify how what we believe and teach

impacts real life. The praxis avoided teaching a lot of sterile concepts, vocabulary and definitions disconnected from real life.

Cushing points out that there are also problems with this method, however. One problem, which worried the bishops a lot, was that students grew up and could not identify concepts and vocabulary even though they had earlier appropriated them into their lifestyles. The opposite danger, as Cushing explains, is that students learn all the appropriate vocabulary and concepts but not how to apply them to real life. Cushing worries that the academic focus of the Framework has left many students to think of the Catholic faith as the faith of their grandparents. Without engaging students in the curriculum, then schools are only creating knowledgeable students, not informed and committed Catholics.

Faith Formation

In this research, I define faith formation as an engaged learning process in which individuals discover and build their Catholic faith. Although Catholic high schools teach students who may not be Catholic, I find that faith formation in the classroom does not have to be limited to the Catholic faith. I asked all of the participants to rank the importance of faith formation in Catholic schools, and also explain any issues they have experienced with allowing students to form their faith. The answers that I received from this section allowed me to understand that faith formation is something that is a priority, but very hard to accomplish. Cultivating faith is a deeply personal experience, and from my research, it seems that Catholic schools are limited partly in scope due to the diversity of their students.

Teachers actively try to engage students so that classroom lessons can transcend the realm of knowledge and move into the realm of faith. Mr. King recognizes that it is the Holy Spirit that moves hearts and minds, and teachers can only plant seeds and transmit information. According to Mr. King, there is no curriculum that would be enough to instill faith in students. The students who have the strongest faith system at home are the ones who engage the most with the class. Mr. King says that faith formation is an issue that goes all the way back to how the home is set up. Teachers are meant to pass on information to the students, but there is no guarantee that they have sparked faith in a student. “Each student is different,” Mr. King explains, “We are committed to remaining true to Catholic Church teachings and we instruct on her teachings. At the same time, we are respectful that each student is in a different place with their faith.”

Mrs. Ramsey says that she finds it especially important to form faith in her morality classes, and she hopes that all students who come out of her class are able to articulate their own faith. “We want to teach our students to think critically and see how their faith can and should affect every aspect of their life,” Mrs. Ramsey says, “We want to prepare our students to confront different points of view by using the knowledge of the Church and her teachings to respond to them.” This task is not an easy one, however. Every class is different in how much they challenge the teachings of the Church, and these challenges can sometimes become detrimental to the faith of the student. Mrs. Ramsey is confident that for students to form and grow in their faith they must reflect on what they are learning and not simply memorize the material. When I asked Mrs. Ramsey how many of her students actually do this, she said, “Not nearly enough.” She appreciates the purpose of the Framework, but she recognizes that the setup of the Framework places

limitations on the way students can interact with their faith. Mirroring Cushing's previous comments, Mrs. Ramsey says that the textbooks she uses focus heavily on vocabulary as opposed to thought. Although she would prefer to use other textbooks, publishers are not producing material designed to engage students in conversations. "I try to incorporate discussion into the classroom so that students learn more than 'knowledge,' but I usually teach juniors and seniors, and by then students have, unfortunately, already made up their mind on whether or not to engage with their faith."

Cushing explains that faith formation should be at the core of any curriculum in any Catholic setting. "As Catholics, we believe that we are converted in both our heart and our head, and never one without the other. I would go as far to say that conversion comes first through the heart—especially in children and youth." Having a curriculum that engages the emotions and hearts of students is vital to forming the faith. Curricula must be developed in a way that speaks to teenagers, respecting them as individuals and validating their experience, wisdom and opinions. Cushing points to a flaw in the creation of the Framework: It was created by people who have never raised teenagers. "Raising teenagers teaches parents how to pick their battles, how to concentrate on the big pictures, give teens a chance to learn for themselves, to recognize and respect their effort to individuate into mature adults, and most of all, how to be patient because growing up, like growing faith, takes time." The authors of the Framework do not encourage self-discovery, which is crucial to the formation of faith, Cushing says. When I asked Cushing if there was even a place for Catholic schools to be forming faith he responded enthusiastically, "Absolutely! Students have many influences daily and they begin to question the beliefs that may have been instilled at a young age. Catholic classrooms

should be a secure place for students to discuss these questions, while they are also being redirected to let these questions become building blocks for their own faith.” While acknowledging that Catholic schools are not solely responsible for forming faith, Cushing asserts that they do have a privileged proximity to Catholic youth and so they must take advantage of the opportunity to form faith. Cushing believes that it is necessary for schools to have open discussions on faith. Schools should focus more on knowing God than knowing about God, otherwise students will continue to see the Catholic faith as the faith of their grandparents, and have little interest to engage with the faith.

Discussion Topics

For the purpose of this research, I found that it was important to discuss what sorts of topics are currently being talked about in the classroom so that I had a better understanding of how the Framework could be revised. Without knowledge of the conversations that are happening in the classroom, my research would have been even more limited to the scope of what the teachers explain. I asked participants to identify controversial issues that come up in the classroom and ways that they address these issues. Although the Framework has a question and answer section behind every theme, I found that these questions did not cover the controversial topics that are currently being discussed in the classroom, such as abortion, birth control, priestly celibacy and homosexuality. In this section, only the responses of Mr. King and Mrs. Ramsey are relevant.

Mr. King said that the most important topics depend on the specific content of the course and the various grade levels of the students. There are topics that are discussed in classes with much more detail depending on the maturity level of the student. When I

asked Mr. King what topics are important to discuss, beyond the popular controversial ones--birth control, abortion, and gay marriage topics, he responded, "Suffering in the world, war and violence, cruelty and evil. These are all tough subjects for students to discuss, especially when we talk in the context of God. Many students question the existence of a God that can love us unconditionally and yet allows these things to exist in the world." Mr. King explains that when controversial issues are brought up in class, he tries to foster the conversation among the students but also tries to contain the conversation to the parameters of Church teaching. Students also question seeing individuals who claim to be people of faith and yet do not behave in ways that exemplify that faith. Since he is a scripture teacher, Mr. King tries to bring students answers in the form of scripture so the discussions also become a learning opportunity.

Mrs. Ramsey explains that it is during her class that many students want to discuss the "controversial" teachings of the church. "I try to give students the best answer within the Catechism, regardless of whether that is my personal opinion or not," she says. Students have often come to her after class with questions, and she welcomes these private moments to discuss these questions in further depth with her students. The more controversial topics that are discussed in her class include abortion, gay marriage, contraception, male-only clergy, suicide and premarital sex. The morality class is intended to be a guide for students in how to live the Catholic life, but Mrs. Ramsey wants students for her classroom to also be a place to ask questions and feel safe with their own thoughts. "I have told students before that it is okay to disagree with the Church, as long as you do not allow for one issue to take you away from the Church. I

find that too many students choose one topic and allow that topic to be the reason that they leave.”

Reflections on the Framework

This research gathered significant information regarding the curriculum, materials, faith formation and controversies in the classroom. All participants were willing to give honest opinions about what worked and what did not work in the classroom, as well as how they felt about the Framework and Catholic education. This last section of interviews will focus on the final reflections participants have about the Framework in general. It was important to include a section regarding solely the Framework, as the participants aren't working directly with the Framework daily. All of the participants work in a Catholic setting, but the Framework may not be the most salient item in their mind. In order to better my research and findings, I asked all of the participants to give me their final thoughts about the Framework.

Mr. King has praised the Framework from the beginning, and his reflections on the Framework were no different. “The Framework provides guidelines that are helpful in creating curricula and I feel that they allow us, teachers to teach in a way that is aligned with the teachings of the Catholic Church,” he explained. Without the guidance of the Framework, classroom teaching may not be correct and doctrine could be blemished. The Framework allows for teachers to prevent mistakes in teaching doctrine by providing guidelines for teachers to follow. According to Mr. King, “the Bishops have provided us with the correct guidance to achieve [blemish-free doctrine].” The Framework also makes it easier for schools to plan classes and electives for students, therefore, creating a unified Catholic education across the nation. Mr. King acknowledged the limitations of

the Framework when it comes to engaging students in the classroom, but felt that teachers should actively seek alternate ways to engage students. “The responsibility should not only rest with the Bishops,” he said, “We have a commitment as educators to provide students with an engaging environment.” Mr. King felt that the Framework is critical for new teachers, simply because they have little experience in working with students. If these teachers had more experience working with high school students, Mr. King predicted these teachers would be more appreciative of the Framework and its effectiveness in the classroom.

Once more, Mrs. Ramsey was more critical of the Framework than her colleague, but maintained hope for the future of the Framework and its implementation. “As a Catholic teacher, I see the benefits and the constraints of the Framework,” she explained, “It is beneficial in the classroom to have a ‘framework’ for lessons, however, there is still something to be said about if it truly fosters faith in our students.” Mrs. Ramsey explained that she views the Framework in two ways: as a curriculum tool, and as a tool for faith. She finds that the Framework excels as a curriculum tool because it allows for all teachers, new and old, to have a systematic way of choosing materials and creating curricula. However, the Framework may have been a solution presented by the Bishops that was never meant to foster faith. The Bishops were aware that the Framework would be implemented in Catholic high schools, where religious diversity is not uncommon. Mrs. Ramsey made the comment that the Bishops, in all their wisdom, may have intended for the Framework to only create curricula to teach students about God, not necessarily to know God. “I cannot be fully critical of the Framework,” she says, “as its intention may not be what we all hoped it would be.” She finds that for her lessons to be most effective

in the classroom, she incorporates examples that may not be included in the Framework in order to spark conversation among students. “Catholic morality is meant to be a class in where students are exposed to the teachings of the Church, but also come to understand why they should live in a moral manner,” Mrs. Ramsey explained, “I think that it is ultimately important for students to leave my classroom with a better moral understanding—whether or not that came from the Framework.”

Cushing explained once more that he feels that the Framework has sacrificed the shared-praxis used by previous curricula, and does not allow for faith development to happen within the classroom. “Those that wrote the Framework have no experience with teenagers,” according to Cushing, “It takes practice to understand the mind of a teenager.” Without this practice, Cushing fears that the Framework will continue to be inanimate material that does not move students to have a deeper faith. He finds that the Framework should have been written in a way that allows for both a systematic teaching of students about Catholic doctrine as well as requiring students to explore and engage with their faith. The classroom is meant to be a safe environment for conversations among students, and Catholicism should not just be another course that students memorize for a grade. “Catholicism should not be considered to be of the same substance as chemistry or biology,” Cushing argued, “Catholicism should be a course that allows for a deep reflection of the self, meanwhile learning the tradition of the Church.”

Although the Framework is not the only entity to blame, Cushing worries that students leaving Catholic schools will not be as attuned to their Catholic faiths as previous generations that also had formal Catholic educations. Without a sense of commitment to the Church, Catholicism will continue declining across our community.

Conclusions from the Interviews

These interviews truly provided insight to understanding what the Framework looks like in classrooms and in the Church in general. Before I began these interviews, I assumed that all teachers would be supportive of the Framework and have little criticism for its format—like Mr. King. Since the Framework is meant to be a set of building blocks for teachers, I expected everyone to be thankful that it was simply a guideline to be followed—not a set of rules. The responses I gathered from Mrs. Ramsey and Cushing aligned more with my analysis of the Framework as ineffective in the formation of faith, however, their responses allowed for me to expand my understanding of this ineffectiveness. My research was limited in that I did not have the opportunity to work with students, and ask them about their own experiences in the classroom. Although the students may not know about the Framework, having their responses would have enhanced my research because they would have provided first-source accounts to their experiences in forming faith and conscience.

JAMES FOWLER’S STAGES OF FAITH

In the context of this research, I think it is important to discuss the formation of faith and conscience. To explain this process, I will use James Fowler’s Stages of Faith. Fowler adapted the work of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg, and applied the stages of psychological maturity to the stages of faith development. Fowler’s theory includes six stages that humans go through during their lives and not everyone experiences all the stages; in fact, it is rare to see people move through all six stages of faith (Herzer, 2009). The reason that many people do not progress through the stages of faith is what Fowler refers to as “the wall.” After analyzing Fowler’s stages of faith, I

will put these stages of faith in the context of Catholic education and present my hypothesis about “the wall” and its meaning for Catholic education.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective

The first stage, which occurs during the ages of 2-7, is a very egocentric stage. Those in this stage are unable to see perspective other than their own, and have an expanding imagination. Reality and fantasy are usually intermixed in this stage, and the individual cannot tell where one begins and the next ends. Logic is unrestrained at this age, and children believe in mythical stories without doubts. This is a very imitative and impressionable stage where children are influenced by authority figures, like adults. Ideas about God are picked up from the parents or other influential adults.

Stage 2: Mythical Literal

This stage begins with children ages 6-12 as they become more capable of concrete operational thinking. Children begin to understand the world in more logical terms, and begin to separate the imagination from logic. At this age, children accept mythical stories told to them by their community, but are only able to understand them in a literal sense. These mythical stories allow for students to find a place in society, but are one-dimensional in meaning. The world for these children is based on immanent justice and reciprocal fairness. A few people remain in this literal world through adulthood.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional

Most people begin to transition into this change during their early teenage years. Teenagers begin to have questions regarding logic and myths and start to see the contradictions that are present when studied together. Due to expanding social circles, individuals are exposed to new ideas and their attention is no longer focused solely on the

family. At this stage, faith becomes very important as it provides a synthesis for all of the competing news ideas. However, at this stage, individuals struggle to see outside of their box of beliefs, and do not recognize that they live within this box. Faith becomes an identity, and there is no engagement with alternate belief systems. The majority of adults remain in this stage.

Stage 4: Individual-Reflective

If individuals are able to pass through level three, and pass through the wall (discussed later), then they reach this stage that causes self-reflection. Teenagers and young adults begin to realize that they have been thinking within a box, and are now exposed to other “boxes.” While examining their beliefs, individuals may become disillusioned with their faith. They have a higher degree of self-consciousness, and develop a sense of self outside of community roles. During this stage, those in Stage 3 begin to question them and see them as regressing in their faith due to their new questions.

Stage 5: Conjunctive

Individuals at this stage are usually in their early thirties, and rarely do individuals reach this stage before that. The logic that dominated much of Stage 4 is no longer there, as individuals begin to realize the limits of logic. Individuals have a new faith in mythical stories; however, these stories are not only the ones that they grew up in. There is a greater intermixing of faiths at this stage, as individuals begin to reclaim and rework their past. Those in this stage start orienting themselves to the service of others.

Stage 6: Universalizing

This stage is a rare achievement for most people, and does not happen until late adulthood. The individual becomes truly altruistic, similar to figures like Gandhi, Jesus and Mother Teresa. They live their lives in full service of others, and do not doubt their faith or worry about their lives.

“The Wall”

According to Fowler, the wall occurs in between Stages 3 and 4. Individuals that are trying to break free of their thinking box are often discouraged by all of the questions they have regarding their faith traditions. Because these questions are often unwelcomed by organizations, individuals begin to leave their institutions. When put into a religious context, this is the time when many young adults leave the church because they no longer see themselves in alignment with their beliefs. They may feel estranged from their childhood faith, and there are no available resources to help them through this period.

The Stages of Faith & the Framework

Although all of these stages are pertinent when discussing faith and conscience development, Stages 3, 4 and the Wall are of particular importance for the issues embedded in this project. High school students are developmentally between stages 3 and 4, and so it is important to analyze how Catholic schools may be influencing movement in these stages. Although I do not propose that Catholic schools are the only catalyst between stages for students enrolled in these institutions, I think it is reasonable to assume that schools can play a major role in development of faith.

New social circles, which high school students are constantly experiencing, characterize Stage 3. High school students are in this stage as they begin to face new

ideas and have new interactions. Students begin to engage with their youth groups and service projects within their church. Stage 3 allows for students to participate in their faith without question, and students are comfortable in their beliefs. However, these new social circles can also begin to raise questions for students. These social circles are not limited to classmates, but rather can include outside influences like the media. When questions begin to rise in the minds of students, it is important for them to have a safe place to discuss these questions. If the church is unable to provide a comfortable channel for discussing these questions, then students may begin to feel alienated by their concerns and ideas. It is at this moment that Catholic schools can play a crucial role in the development of faith. Classrooms must become atmospheres that accommodate questions about faith and tradition, so that students do not get stuck at the wall, and consequently leave the Church.

Catholic schools are not the only entities responsible for fostering a secure environment of discussion, but they have a privileged proximity to students transitioning between stages. If Catholic education classes are static, and only teach on doctrine disembodied from life, then students may not have the same avenues of discussion than if the classes were interactive. Classrooms, and curricula, must have engaging material that encourages students to answer questions about themselves, not only written material. However, engaging material does not mean that material is no longer rigorous. Both styles of teaching as not mutually exclusive of each other, and I believe that there are ways classes could be reformed to achieve a compromise of both styles.

The Framework, in the way it is currently written, is a cause for the wall that many students encounter while transitioning between stages of faith. Due to its doctrine-

focused nature, the Framework requires teachers to adhere to teaching knowledge, as opposed to encouraging reflection. Since high school students are more likely to understand information through discussion-based classes, the structure of knowledge-based curricula is becoming outdated in classes like theology. Publishers seem to have been afraid to produce materials that they know are more age appropriate as well as doctrinally correct, perhaps out of fear at not receiving the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* for their books. In order for Catholic theology classes to reflect this learning style of students, the Framework must be revised in a way that the material becomes engaging and interactive, while maintaining academic integrity.

RESOLUTION

The question at hand now is how to reconcile effective teaching methods with maintaining blemish-free doctrine in Catholic school theology courses. This question requires a multi-faceted answer that highlights some of the suggestions made by O'Malley earlier in this study.

The first step to finding reconciliation between the best teaching methods and pure doctrine is to reform the Framework. The Framework is currently the building block for all theology courses. In order for reforms to occur nationwide regarding theology curricula, the Framework must be updated accordingly. Reforming the Framework is much easier said than done. In order for the Framework to be rewritten, the United States Conference of Bishops must gather and vote on proposed changes to the Framework. If the United States Council of Catholic Bishops were willing to rewrite the Framework, they would need to do it with a different mindset than they had in 2007. The committee cannot continue to assume that every student in Catholic high schools has an ingrained

faith, or even any familiarity with faith. To assume that students have familiarity with faith is to make the mistake of not including faith-building exercises in the classroom. The Framework currently assumes that students have an appreciation of altruistic values and an awareness of the transcendent. If students had both of these qualities coming into high school, then the Framework's current method would be more effective because students would be able to add knowledge to their already established faith. However, since this is not the case for many teenagers, giving knowledge to students is merely just that—giving knowledge without meaning.

In order to be effective, the Framework should encourage schools to set a foundation on which to build faith and conscience. This foundation should include heightening awareness of the miraculous order of the universe. Students should be exposed to the magnanimous presence of God in the everyday experience, as well as God's presence in the universe. Discussions can include contemporary issues such as, "Where is God during war?" and "What is the role of God in natural disasters?" Questions like these are the questions that come up in the minds of teenagers, and are valid questions in the world that we live in. Theology teachers should be responsible for invoking this heightened awareness by tracing back the Catholic connection between knowledge and faith. Only when students become aware of God's presence can classes about theology begin to be effective. At this point, teachers can begin discussions with students about their experience with God in their lives, as well as their perception of God in the world. Building this foundation does not exclude doctrine, however. Once students have begun to explore answers to the questioned previously mentioned, teachers can begin to teach the Catholic answer to these questions. This technique goes back to the

shared-praxis method that Cushing referred to earlier. By creating an open discussion about the role of God in the universe, the Framework would create open discussions about other issues students may have about religion and faith.

After building a foundation about the role of God in the world, Catholic schools should strive to teach about the role of God in the individual. In order to do this, a relationship must be fostered between students and God. Although this is not something that schools can realistically teach, it is something that schools can encourage and foster. The root form of the word “religion” is *religare*, which means, “to connect.” Without creating connections, there is no existence of religion; that is, religion classes cannot be taught without fostering a connection between students and God. In an era of fact-checking and information overload, students should be taught that faith is about moral certitude, which is a calculated risk, as opposed to absolute certitude. The Framework should instruct teachers on how to safely allow their students to be vulnerable in their faith, and allow for students to be able to participate in discussions regardless, of where they are in their relationship with God.

In order to avoid the wall of faith development, the Framework must encourage that teachers entertain the questions students bring as valid questions. Each question must be answered carefully, so as to not make the student feel that they are the only person with that question. Schools are responsible for being forums of discussion and ideas, and so Catholic schools are also responsible for exposing students to other religious traditions. If Catholic schools were able to expose students to these alternate ideas, then teachers would have the opportunity to interact with the questions students might have when they learn about other traditions. The media is constantly brainwashing us all, and

so it is important that teachers become a source of knowledge and compassion for students to seek out when they have questions about the relationship between their developing faith and the faith of others.

When schools and curricula have created this three-part foundation, then the information currently included in the Framework will become effective and publishers may well step up to the plate of publishing more age appropriate material. In a sense, the steps that are mentioned above would serve as a new introduction or prologue into the information already presented in the Framework. At this point, schools will have engaged students to want to learn more about their faith, and will then have the opportunity to focus more on doctrine. As students get older, and their faith begins to mature, classes that focus on doctrine will become more valuable because there is already a foundation of faith. Instead of reaching the wall while moving between stages and feeling isolated because of their questions, these students will have groundwork of support and information so that they are not deterred from remaining within the Church. By adding a prologue to the Framework, Catholic curricula could become more integrative and aid students moving between Stages 3 and 4 of faith development.

If the Framework is not revised, then there could be serious negative consequences that occur. Students could continue to leave Catholic high schools with little knowledge about their faith and relationship with God, which would only lead to a distant relationship with the Church. This distant relationship could mean that an entire generation of students would be lost due to the Church's current focus on doctrine and theology. Catholic high schools are not the only responsible entities in recreating relationships with the younger generation, but they are an integral of the solution part due

to their privileged proximity to young students. The atmosphere in the Church today is also the perfect environment for reform to take place in. Pope Francis has deviated from Benedict's focus on doctrine, and is emphasizing the importance of a relationship with God. With discussions like this already happening at the Vatican, it is the perfect time for the USCCB to reform the Framework to mirror Francis' message of faith.

CONCLUSION

Parents send students to Catholic schools for a variety of reasons. The reasons range from academically rigorous programs to having students learn about the Catholic faith. Although parents may be sending students to Catholic schools because of their high reputation, Catholic schools still have the responsibility of providing quality religious education. The Catholic Church has attempted to create building blocks for schools to base their Catholic curricula, however, the Framework, in my view, is currently ineffective for forming faith and conscience. Per the interviews conducted, it is clear to see that the Framework has its strengths and its weaknesses when it is implemented in the classroom. Because of these strengths and weaknesses, it is important to not dismiss the work of the Framework as a whole, but rather, to suggest additions or revisions to the Framework. These additions would provide a new foundation for students to feel comfortable sharing their faith and engaging with new ideas. By providing this safe environment, students will be able to develop between Fowler's stages of faith. Through the suggestions outlined above, students could learn to know God, and not simply about God.

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