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## Tolkien's Allegory: Using Peter Jackson's Vision of Fellowship to Illuminate Male Adolescent Catholic Education

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*With many of the Catholic student population disengaged from regular ritual experiences their working vocabulary of the prayers and knowledge of the Church is limited. A beneficial bridge for many of these disconnected students, specifically male adolescents has been the use of storytelling in connection to Catholic themes to lay the foundations of ritual and deeper concepts through a more familiar setting. Through media literary, multi-modal instruction and Scripture exegesis adolescents can begin to recognize, understand, and feel a connection with the severity of the sacrifice of the Apostles in following Jesus of Nazareth. This article will offer some insights that have proven to be beneficial to help male adolescents to engage the complicated and foreign concepts and topics of the new curriculum framework, in association with Peter Jackson's vision of Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring.*

### Keywords

Religious education, curriculum, Catholic literature, adolescents, instruction

Catechesis is the act of handing on the Word of God intended to inform the faith community and candidates for initiation into the Church about the teachings of Christ transmitted by the Apostles. It also involves the lifelong effort of forming people into witnesses to Christ and opening their hearts to the spiritual transformation given by the Holy Spirit. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2005). Storytelling is a powerful tool for transformative catechesis. It is the primary means of Jesus's teaching which continuously guides religious educators to establish a bridge between the deposit of faith and their respective cultures. Storytelling has a way to illuminate profound truths, ask deeper questions, and challenge established perspectives in ways that mere facts and figures often cannot. Contextualized storytelling has been used as an ancient form to carry on oral traditions, to pass on history, as well as to serve as a technique for educational pedagogy. This method of pedagogy has been investigated with a renewed spirit in con-

temporary research for its benefits in educational settings and uses throughout various cultural traditions. Several researchers have documented the connectivity storytelling has with students and their engagement with material in the classroom (Dawkins & O'Neill, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Hawke, Ledger, & Shufflebotham, 2011). From young children to the elderly, stories help an individual find a place within a frame of reference.

This frame of reference is an especially essential element in the life of an adolescent (Sax, 2007). As adolescents search for the stability of self-identity and for community in relationships, they also seek spiritual identity (Giusanni, 2001). Although this feeling of searching in adolescents is well documented in youth ministry, there has been less attention paid toward the phenomena in Catholic educational environments and toward creative solutions to re-engage adolescents within an educational institution (Convey, 2010; Dean, 2010). This can be especially challenging for a male adolescent. Rohr and Martos (2005) offer that a male spirituality encourages men to take the radical gospel journey from their own unique beginning point, in their own unique style, with their own unique goals—which is what one ends up doing anyway, but with no doubt or apology or need to imitate our sisters or even our fathers, for that matter.

Peter Jackson's vision of Tolkien's work, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* will be the primary story used to create a bridge between Catholic faith tradition and the lives of teenage males in hopes to challenge these young men to understand their own distinctive spirituality.

The focus of this article is effective catechesis in light of male adolescent spirituality in a rural, Midwestern, all male Catholic secondary school. Specifically, this article will illustrate that the pedagogical practice of utilizing storytelling techniques in Catholic education is an opportunity to re-engage adolescent males in religious education, that stories of Catholic authors of fiction such as J.R.R. Tolkien have a dynamic ability to reach the male adolescent in the midst of his search for identity, and ultimately that these sacred stories challenge male adolescents with mature questions that work as tools to relate to real-life moral challenges and faith experiences they will have throughout their lives.

### Review of Literature

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has offered since 2007 a collection of doctrinal elements for a curriculum framework to be used within religious education in Catholic secondary schools (USCCB,

2008). These topics have challenged educators by introducing in high school catechetical material that previously was introduced in undergraduate and Seminary studies. Some of the most challenging aspects of these doctrinal elements revolve around ecclesial topics, the introduction of vocabulary, as well as Christological typologies that are often foreign to high school aged students and some of the educators, who do not often use such terms. Although this material offers a depth in knowledge of the legacy and tradition of the Church it can often come across as being distant from the everyday life of a high school student.

### **A Call for Change in the Religious Curriculum for Adolescents**

It is necessary for educational changes to be considered and made according to the needs of the students. Although change is difficult, especially for lifetime educators, it is needed to ensure success for the student and to offer the depth of knowledge needed to truly engage the faith in the midst of contemporary challenges. Twenty-first century learners are growing up in a culture that is different from previous generations. Although there are too many differences to focus on here, it is important to acknowledge three differences that have significantly created confusion in the religious views of adolescents that affect basic Catholic education.

The National Study of Youth and Religion (2003) collected a wealth of data that assisted in identifying challenges affecting contemporary youth. From that research, it is evident that many contemporary youth are disconnected from an active faith and believe that merely acting “nice” is what the Gospel entails, and is what one must do to be considered a faithful Christian (Dean, 2010). This philosophy, Moral Therapeutic Deism, is a distortion of authentic Christian practice because it relies on the beliefs that God is distant and only present when called upon as needed and that God only desires an individual to be happy and feel good about who they are (Smith & Denton, 2009). Dean (2010) indicates that this belief is equally present in Catholic and Protestant adolescents.

It is also clear from the research of Convey (2010), which is based on the National Catholic Education Association’s (NCEA) national religious education assessment, ACRE, that students struggle to correctly identify critical aspects of the Catholic curriculum, such as topics throughout Church history, the writings of theologians like Thomas Aquinas, and the teachings and identification of major feasts throughout the Liturgical Year.

Heft (2011) states that for American Catholic schools to keep their identity, it is essential for Catholic schools to have an autonomous curriculum that includes Catholic catechesis. If Catholic education is about passing on the faith, what is needed to authentically pass it on? Through his studies in the education and spirituality of Thomas Merton, Del Prete (1990) indicates that education needs to engage the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. Adolescents need to progress and evolve in self-discovery, but to do that they need to have a context of language, ritual, and culture from which to develop (Dean, 2010; Canales, 2011).

Due to the lack of knowledge of specifically Catholic vocabulary, events, ritual, as well as the cultural influence of Moral Therapeutic Deism and the possibility of assimilation in a secular educational system, adolescents need a curriculum that addresses the challenges of the world and offers them an opportunity to engage that culture from a personal context. These three cultural experiences of adolescents indicate that there is a need for a change in the curriculum of Catholic education. Following the USCCB's call for implementation of the new curriculum expectations, there have been some trends that have emerged throughout this time of transition that still need to be addressed to fruitfully engage adolescents in the dialogue between Christianity and secularism.

### **Current Trends from the Framework Implementation**

**Ecclesial language.** One of the emerging trends is that the ecclesial language of the USCCB's framework and the level of the students' experiences significantly differ. To bridge this difference, religious educators need to bridge a gap between the expected language of the framework and the students' knowledge and vocabulary skills. Educators can bring the abstract to real life by creating an application for the students to fully grasp the concept of a Greek- or Latin-based term. Concepts such as the Thomistic Proofs of God's existence, disordered affections and Christian Anthropology, as well as terms such as *philia*, *agapé*, *hypostatic union*, and *consubstantial* may be foreign to first year high school students. The use of these terms and topics can have a very powerful effect upon faith, but there is much background needed before the students have the tools to be able to use such terms appropriately. Mere memorization is not a strong enough motivation to assist the students to expand their vocabulary and truly engage and love the tradition of the Church.

**Lack of time to understand the historical-critical context of Scripture stories.** A second emerging trend of the implementation of the current curriculum involves the lack of time offered to have a deep understanding of Scripture and sacred stories. Each course in the USCCB framework is structured similarly to an undergraduate college or seminary course with material taught in semester-based topics. Both course one, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ in Sacred Scripture* (USCCB, 2008) and course two, *Who is Jesus Christ?* (USCCB, 2008) focus primarily on understanding the basics of Scripture exegesis and study, but from a thematic perspective instead of from a historical-critical context. The time required to research, investigate, and engage the cultural context of the core of faith in stories is limited, especially with students who have not been exposed previously to such stories in a consistent way.

**Cultural contexts and experiences of the students.** A third trend relates to the need to interact with the real-life culture of the students. Since the age of the Apostles, the Church has desired to bring the message and teachings of Christ to all peoples, nations, and cultures (Mt. 28:18-20). For 2000 years, there have been many educators and evangelists who followed this tradition of passing on the cognitive and formative message of Christ through diverse cultural avenues of their time periods (Rengers, 2000).

The earliest model of adapting evangelization to the culture of the people can be found in the New Testament. As early as 50AD Paul of Tarsus offered examples of these techniques of evangelization through the use of Greco-Roman images and the ancient Greek Philosophers to better relate the message of Christ to the non-Jewish inhabitants throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 17:22-31). As Saint Paul states in his letter to the community at Corinth, "Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. All this I do for the sake of the Gospel, so that I too may have a share in it." (1 Cor. 9:19,23).

After the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo and Jerome established the beginnings of standardized Christian Theological education. Augustine wrote and preached utilizing his foundational Neo-Platonist educational background within the cultural framework and educational methods of the time to explain Christianity to a more learned audience (Rengers, 2000). Jerome evolved the first standard for Scriptural commentaries to help bring ancient cultures to the forefront of Christianity in order to authentically investigate the cultural context of Scripture and its application and value to the contemporary time period



(Rengers, 2000). Throughout the early and middle ages, theologians including Patrick (5<sup>th</sup> century), Cyril and Methodius (9<sup>th</sup> century), and Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century) brought the Gospel to the language of the people through the use of cultural images in their teaching. The 16<sup>th</sup> century brought missionaries such as Francis Xavier who challenged the assumptions and norms of his times by relating the Gospel to the people of India and Japan through culturally rich pedagogical avenues meaningful to their culture, such as music and the appreciation of their native languages (Brockey, 2007).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a new revitalization of re-engaging the Christian message and Tradition to the world through the writings of the Vatican II Council. *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) clearly outlines the necessity to open wide the doors of bringing the message of Jesus alive through the language and expression of the contemporary world. In the spirit of the Council, Benedict XVI's message on the 43<sup>rd</sup> World Communications Day (2009) aptly states:

Many benefits flow from this new culture of communication: families are able to maintain contact across great distances; students and researchers have more immediate and easier access to documents, sources and scientific discoveries, hence they can work collaboratively from different locations; moreover, the interactive nature of many of the new media facilitates more dynamic forms of learning and communication, thereby contributing to social progress.

### **The Challenges for an All-Male Adolescent Religious Education**

One further aspect that offers a challenge to implanting the framework is the audience in the Catholic education environment. Although there are many Catholic institutions that have a co-ed population, there still exist Catholic environments that educate all male or all female populations. This study will focus primarily on the challenges associated with Catholic education for an all-male adolescent population.

Male adolescents develop biologically different than girls (Burke, 2011). The development of the visual cortex in boys starts at a rapid pace around the age of 14, in comparison to girls who start at a much earlier age. Sax (2007) also indicates that language can become a critical issue in male engagement in education. For example, the wording of essay questions can play a significant role in the disengagement of male adolescents in school. Essay questions that are emotionally based or are phrased around the term "feel" relate better with a female audience, but for a male audience, the emotional response is less accessible because of the stage at which the brain is biologically devel-

oped in an adolescent male. The brain of a male adolescent student responds to action-based topics and would respond easier to a question based on using the term “do” (Shaffer & Gordon, 2005; Sax 2007).

In addition to biological changes, male students encounter powerful societal expectations linked to masculinity. Ong (1981) states that many traits associated with traditional notions of masculinity are manifest through great trials or adversarial actions in the life of a male. The vocabulary of men in such positions often develops into outlandish and ostentatious expressions, such as in the actions of bragging songs of World War I & II, the actions and speech of sport icons such as Muhammed Ali and Mickey Mantle, and even riotous cheering at sporting events by spectators (Ong, 1981). Such activities are not deemed appropriate in common civility but are appropriate in athletic activities and sporting events. Kelly (2010) recounts the differences of athletic customs and language of adolescent males and the expectations in the classroom. Many young males are drawn into a society that expects them to act in a certain way. There is tension between different views of masculinity in our modern-day culture (Shaffer & Gordon, 2005; Sax, 2007; Burke, 2011). Catechists teach that one vital aspect of male spirituality is establishing healthy relationships. “It ought to be taught in terms of the capacity to love and to be loved.” (Marx, 2003, p. 36).

Those who depart from these behavioral expectations risk being labeled as different and often excluded from peer groups (Sax, 2007). American culture, on the whole, has lost the use of positive rituals acknowledging maturation, especially in the life of young males (Rohr, 2005). Such rituals that still exist are often seen on the fringe of society, such as gang initiations, use of aggressive physical or verbal force, or team achievements in sports. Challenges abound for young males to find connectivity to an evolving contemporary culture that often neglects them. In some avenues, contemporary technology is now filling the void that many young men have experienced with the lack of maturation rituals in society (Sax, 2007).

### **Bridging the Gap**

This article presents an innovative and speculative approach to bridging the gap between the USSCB’s framework and curriculum expectations and the nature and context of male adolescents. The intervention described in this article uses Peter Jackson’s film adaptation of author J.R.R Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings* as an allegory for adolescent males to comprehend discipleship in light of the curriculum framework mandated



by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, engaging adolescent males and providing them with an innovative way to explain theological concepts through analyzing the primary themes and evaluating development of major characters. Therefore the students' formative journey begins by discovering how adolescent males can use the sacrificial story of Frodo Baggins as a bridge to travel deeper into their faith life.

Yanal (2010) indicates that storytelling, specifically in film, brings an audience to an emotional experience and response that is based on a hybrid- truth of perceptions of the real world, and not merely based within one's imagination. Based on this philosophical perspective, this study will use storytelling as an educational technique, specifically Peter Jackson's visual presentation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), as a bridge from a fictional setting of action and hybrid-truths of the life of a male adolescent to real-life, merging the introduction of foreign ancient vocabulary and topics that define Catholic education to connect with and engage the student to theological course material.

Effective storytelling is an instructional strategy that is primary to the success of interpreting sacred scripture. However, the balance of instructional strategies creates an effective model for an educator. The crux of these strategies is biblical exegesis and use of higher order thinking skills (Bloom, 1956). Through the use of contemporary film, Catholic themes, such as the spiritual journey, conversion, and virtue students can analyze and apply historical, form, and source criticism as they are able to engage the work of Tolkien. The expectation set forth by the educational leader is one that challenges if not requires students to view *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* not as an opportunity to watch a film, but as an educational tool to the curriculum. Therefore, context and consistency in the explanation of contemporary film as supplement to the theology curriculum ideally sets the stage for students to engage further and adapt more quickly in the process through the connection of familiarity and real-life application.

Although the use of storytelling is foundational, it is practical instructional strategies that aid teachers in their quest to become effective catechists. Passionate catechists teach the faith through authentic honesty and living. This genuine approach to catechesis draws students to witness the teacher as a model to aid in the exploration of their relationship with Jesus Christ.

The use of contemporary film can assist in this process of making relevant connections while attempting to meet students where they are in their spiritual development. "Build curriculum from and for learners' lives. Encour-

age people to look at and reflect upon their own experiences, draw upon what they already know, teach with relevance to their lives, and help them make connections.” (Groome, 1998, p.107). The research is primarily focused on the relationship between discipleship and Peter Jackson’s vision of Fellowship and is explored in the following categories: substitutions for God based on Thomistic thought, the Beatitudes of Jesus Christ found in Matthew’s Gospel, and Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant. The trends reflects a greater understanding of theological concepts through the use of a multi-modal approach to instruction and have been verified by greater engagement in class discussion as well as higher scores on objective and subjective questions pertaining to discipleship.

Early in the curriculum, the students are introduced to the topics of faith and reason and recognized the three mysteries of God: omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, based on the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Students are also introduced to the writings on temptations and substitutions for God: power, wealth, pleasure, and honor. These earthly desires, although good in moderation, can become addictive for many, especially for young adults. Beyond just identifying and explaining these substitutions for God, students are challenged to detach from these desires or disordered affections. To put Aquinas in a more contemporary language, Word of Fire’s series, Catholicism (2011), narrated by Bishop Robert Barron, aids the students with this complex theological material. For example, Christological themes such as sacrifice, spiritual poverty, and detachment are explored in conjunction with the Beatitudes and Jesus’ teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Specifically, Bishop Barron quotes Aquinas, stating “if you want the perfect exemplification of the Beatitudes, look to Christ crucified.” (Barron, 2011). This idea is used to expand the notion of discipleship to detach from the substitutions for God in order to understand the correlation between sacrifice and happiness. To that end, Bishop Barron challenges disciples to see a happy man when viewing the picture of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Through the application of these Christological and theological concepts to Tolkien’s literary characters, Frodo emerges as the allegorical model of detachment and sacrifice. Frodo Baggins, a hobbit of the Shire, is a common individual in a back-water culture and a seemingly insignificant character. This ordinary individual is called to be an extraordinary responsibility. “When God calls us to go beyond our spiritual comfort zone, we begin to feel nervous or uncomfortable. We would prefer not to go outside the zone until we feel better about it.” (Ortberg, 2001, p. 83). The call from uncertainty

to prophetic mission is present when Frodo accepts the responsibility of his call to journey outside of his comfort zone. As the students watch sections of the film and apply these theological concepts, the educator has the opportunity to break open similar parallels between characters from Middle Earth to characters in sacred scripture specifically, but not limited to, the call of ordinary people to do extraordinary tasks such as Abraham, Moses and the Apostles.

Service and compassion are essential to the history and tradition of Catholic education. Using the talking points of the call to discipleship is natural, and follow up questions can point to the students and their experience of service towards others. "At the end of our life, we ought to be able to look back over our deathbed and know that somehow the world was a better place because we lived, we loved, and we were other-centered, other-focused." (Marx, 2003, p. 36).

Many Catholic schools incorporate service hours as part of curriculum throughout their high school years. With the addition of vocabulary words such as witness and missionary mandate, students can continue to observe connections between the textbook, their service work, scripture, and Tolkien's novel. The natural progression of connecting their heads, hands, and hearts through the lens of service is an opportunity not to waste.

Service and sacrifice are instrumental components to recognizing and understanding the Paschal Mystery. Another example of typology regarding characters that can be used in conjunction with the Fellowship universe could be the image of the Suffering Servant (Is. 52:13- 53:12). Built upon the theme of sacrifice and the challenge to "carry our cross and follow," the Suffering Servant provides for the faithful the ultimate example of discipleship. One of the guided questions the students may want to explore as they reflect upon the film could focus on Mark's Gospel and the use of the imagery of the Suffering Servant, such as how Frodo could be perceived as a Suffering Servant in the course of the story. Therefore, the deeper question is for the students to answer the call to sacrifice, thus answering the call to discipleship in their lives.

Young men of high school age have the opportunity to recognize that their spiritual journey is not one completed alone (Rohr & Martos, 2005). Answering the call of discipleship will be more fruitful when evangelizing and serving with others that share in the benefits of a covenantal relationship. By analyzing the lives of spiritual ancestors of faith presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, students can recognize the power of covenant relationship with

God. Further investigation of context is vital for the students to evaluate their obstacles in light of answering the call to discipleship. Thus, a study of cultural obstacles to faith such as: nihilism, individual, cultural relativism, and fatalism should be taught as the students use the story in the film to apply these challenges to their own faith journey as well.

Critical thinking can be practiced when provided the chance to connect learning to what other teachers in the school building are doing. In *Seasons of Life* (Marx, 2003) one of the main themes is “finding a cause other than yourself.” Inspired by this mantra, the teacher has the opportunity once again to make relevant connections to school service requirement and the mission of the fellowship of the ring, who work towards overcoming evil in Middle Earth. By allowing students to have journal time and reflect upon the themes of *Seasons of Life*, Sacred Scripture, and *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, students would have the opportunity to process and apply those reflections to “their cause” and how their call forces them to become less egocentric and more selfless; thus becoming truly happy as young men who sacrifice for others. Through reflection questions and class discussion students can listen to their classmates and appreciation for the faith journey of others as well. Furthermore, the recognition that each young man in the classroom is on a journey not only in high school, but to understand their place in the world.

To fully implement and engage the students in the curriculum, it is essential to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Each piece is a reflection of the multi-modal approach in education whereas a combination of many strategies are used in order for students to be able to synthesize the information. As an educational leader, the teacher in the classroom is providing strategies that helps students recognize the systematic nature of theology. This type of catechesis common to early Church pedagogy should become “a vehicle for growth in one’s relationship with the Lord so that each may come to know him and live according to the truth he has given to us.” (USCCB, 2008). It is through Christian anthropology that a student can understand the mystery in their lives and the faith that is a gift to embrace.

J.R.R. Tolkien and his saga *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* provides an example of a tale of answering the call to do something great with the talents bestowed and faith inside of us. This story indeed teaches relevant theological themes and challenges adolescent males to reflect upon the connections present to that of discipleship.

The use of storytelling through contemporary film assists the process while attempting to meet students where they are in the spiritual develop-

ment. Similar to any relationship, whether parent-child or between friends, the call to relationship with God cannot be answered until one understands the responsibilities that the call entails. It is in this honest understanding of discipleship that a young person can find hope and grow to develop into a man of faith.

### Conclusion

As male adolescents are challenged to see how their spiritual journey calls them to sacrifice in light of their understanding of discipleship, they can discover that this journey will provide the opportunity for them to share in the Paschal Mystery. When a man cannot do greatness in some real sense, his life has no universal significance or transcendent meaning (Rohr & Martos, 2005). The crux of this understanding of discipleship is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that expands throughout all facets of a person's life; which is the goal of religious education. This desire to know, love, and serve God is echoed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find truth and happiness he never stops searching for" (CCC, 26). The spiritual journey is at times unknown, and the call often remains unanswered for male adolescents due to the necessary period of egocentrism as well as the attempt to reconcile the psycho-social stage of development: identity versus role confusion (Marcia et al., 1993). Therefore, the recognition of the importance of male spiritual development by students is aided by catechists who meet them where they are in the contemporary culture while creating a bridge that leads toward the Catholic faith tradition through effective use of storytelling, media literacy, and biblical exegesis. This contextual approach, which uses Peter Jackson's film to support the Curriculum Framework drafted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2008, takes careful planning. The use of multi-modal instruction while highlighting a known Catholic author such as J.R.R. Tolkien and his work, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, as a supplemental tool to support young men of high school age in their understanding of Catholic tradition can be successful when presenting the material in a comprehensive way that systemically and consistently draws students to deepen their knowledge of faith through the application of theological concepts to fiction and then their own personal story.

Creating a classroom climate where students are accustomed to interpreting religious truth is at the heart of the learning experience in theology. The

use of contemporary film to supplement the *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for People of High School Age* is an experience for students that can aid in the following areas: the depth of class discussions, the retention of vocabulary words and theological concepts, and the ability to apply as well as analyze the material using historical criticism and biblical exegesis. While the results have been positive in regards to the importance of utilizing Jackson's film for effective catechesis, it must be noted that thoughtful analysis is necessary for continued use of this instructional strategy.

### **Further Research and Responses**

As mentioned in the literature review, three trends that have limited greater implementation of the framework are: ecclesial language, lack of time offered to depend understanding of scripture stories, and real life cultural context and experiences of students, need further attention by the educator. To further research and address these trends it is necessary to keep in mind the following possible responses.

#### **1. Effective Cognitive and Formative Development for Religious Educators**

Avoid profane babbling and the absurdities of so called knowledge.  
(1Tim. 6:20-21)

Assisting adolescent students with development in cognitive and formative religious education continues to be a challenge. To meet that challenge, it is essential for educators to continue to develop their skills and knowledge through beneficial professional development. Due to the exponential change of the technological culture, the way students engage and learn is considerably different from previous generations. If educators desire to bring theology to the contemporary context for an adolescent male, they need to acknowledge and recognize the differences in learning styles between their generation and that of the students. This creates a challenge for religious educators because they are expected to develop technological skills and continue to develop knowledge in their subject while also learning how to connect those skills with that knowledge in order to ensure a stronger outcome for students.

Intersecting between knowledge of theological content and the students' culture, which includes ever-changing technology, provides the opportunity



for the educator to evaluate the execution of the class material with regards to the language being used. One of the implicit desires for catechists is to deliver the material in a format that engages adolescent students in their journey of faith with a language that is inviting. This type of language should unify the students in light of the changing culture and climate in which they live. Therefore, the role of the educator is to reflect the evangelizing words of the Apostles at Pentecost so that the audience hears the story and understands the context in relation to their life from their own native tongue (Acts 2:8). This includes the teacher's recognition of student needs in regards to learning styles, the challenges and opportunities associated with the contemporary culture, and the development of the skills necessary to inspire students to travel beyond basic storytelling from sacred scripture into application and analysis while understanding that the love of a Christian God is a constant in a world that is changing. Thus, the image of a compassionate and universal savior as presented in Luke's Gospel can be the primary example to bring students from various diverse backgrounds in contemporary culture together to recognize their role in communal identity as Christians.

## **2. Further Development of Media Literacy and incorporation in Educational Strategies**

Although many of us strongly believe in the great promise that technology holds for both learners and teachers, we also need to remember that, first and foremost, technology is a communication tool. It is not the silver bullet that will solve all of our education problems... It is not about what technology by itself can do, but what teachers and learners may be able to accomplish using these tools. (Earle, 2002, p. 42)

Following in the footsteps of some of the most effective evangelists of Christianity, contemporary catechists are continuing to discern how to best use the new forms of media and technology to spread the Gospel to their contemporary culture (Cimino, Haney, O'Keefe, & Zukowski, 2000; Dunlap, 2007). Media literacy, which focuses on the abilities needed to read, create, and evaluate media, is one of the most immediate skills needed in today's culture (Hoffman, 2011). With the open access of information available through the web, individuals need to have the skills to be able to accept or reject the authenticity or credibility of posts, blogs, and comments viewable on the Internet. This evaluation process becomes even more critical when it comes to material regarding religious beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas (Dunlap, 2007).

Pope Francis' comments challenge us to critically think about the use and misuse of media in regards to this issue: "We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment" (Francis, 2013, #64).

To sustain the values and virtues of Christian tradition it is essential to frame the context of media literacy for religious education. Media messages should be filtered through a Gospel context, showing an individual the connectivity of the contemporary world with the world of Christian virtue (John Paul II, 1992). Educators should have development opportunities to encourage the use of media that promotes Christian values and traditions. Religious education ought to incorporate technology to weave together the Gospel and culture, preparing individuals to see technology as a tool to deepen an understanding of cognitive and formative religious education (Hoffman, 2011).

### 3. Engagement with Contemporary Culture

Along with traditional means such as witness of life, catechetics, personal contact, popular piety, the liturgy and similar celebrations, the use of media is now essential in evangelization and catechesis. Indeed, "the Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect". The media of social communications can and should be instruments in the Church's program of re-evangelization and new evangelization in the contemporary world. (John Paul II, 1992, #11)

The goal as the educator in the classroom is to meet students where they are in their lives and cultures. Thankfully, Peter Jackson's film series, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), *The Desolation of Smaug* (2013), and *The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014) has assisted in making the story of Middle Earth continually relevant in the scope of a male high schoolers' lives. There is energy and excitement in the classroom as students are waiting to see how this story will relate to the main learning objectives in the course. However, there are students whose interest is not aligned with fantasy literature or contemporary film. In those specific cases, students need more background work in the plot, character association and development, as well as the use of myth to understand religious truth. Providing a document that lays out the characters' names and their roles would likely be necessary. As the teacher in the

classroom attempts to meet students where they are, the creation of a lesson that puts Tolkien and the culture in which he lived in context is paramount. Thus students would be able to apply the lessons of the story to more than the theology curriculum, but also been given the opportunity to make connections and draw conclusions in their world history course.

Further research should be conducted regarding the evaluation of this material from the students' short-term memory to their long-term memory. Assessing students on material on final exam in the form of relevant essay questions gives data as to students' retention of the material beyond a specific unit of study. Likewise, creating reading and writing assignments based on various Catholic and/or Christian authors would be a way for students to understand the concepts and definitions of the theology curriculum without merely relying on the writings of Tolkien.

Supplementing the theology curriculum with selected readings from authors such as C.S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, and G.K. Chesterton may help students understand the concepts of sacrifice, journey, redemption, or covenant. Exposure to the Church cannot be limited to the theology class in a Catholic school. Tolkien and Jackson is just one strategy for catechists to challenge male adolescents to reflect upon and understand their spirituality; however, there are many possibilities for educators in a Catholic school to complete this task. To that end, further incorporation of Catholic authorship as authentic writers who observe the "signs of the times" and the challenge of one's response as a disciple would broaden the students' knowledge of their own faith through an interdisciplinary approach. The incorporation of Catholic authors in English courses and/or the use of documents from ecumenical councils in history courses would provide exposure to the Church from many different disciplines. These are some examples to support the theology curriculum framework by the USCCB in a Catholic secondary school with the hope of engaging the male adolescents and pull them from their culture into the life of the Church.

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