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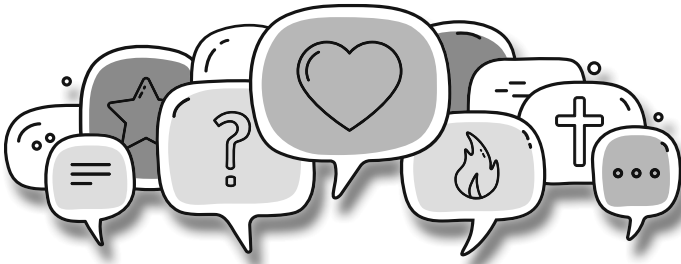
# Faith Talk



Having Conversations  
That Matter with Youth

Robert J. McCarty, DMin

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Printed in the United States of America

3838

ISBN 978-1-64121-016-4

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: McCarty, Robert J., author.

Title: Faith talk: having conversations that matter with youth / Robert J. McCarty, DMin.

Description: Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018051203 | ISBN 9781641210164

Subjects: LCSH: Church work with youth—Catholic Church. | Catholic youth—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BX2347.8.Y7 M3185 2018 | DDC 259/.23—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018051203>

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# Introduction

Anyone involved in youth ministry, adolescent catechesis, Confirmation preparation, or Catholic education knows the importance of engaging young people in “faith talk” or “God talk.” Faith talk is simply what the term states. It is creating opportunities for conversations with young people about their understanding of God, their faith journey, their beliefs, their questions, and their doubts. Faith talk involves creating safe and sacred places where young people can grapple with their faith questions, share their experiences of God’s presence in their lives, and share their experiences of God’s absence as well.

Authentic faith talk is desperately needed in today’s ministry with young people. Young people are disaffiliating from the Church in record numbers, and one contributing reason is their experience of being “voiceless” in the Church. Authentic faith talk is grounded in a firm commitment to listen to young people, a deep, nonjudgmental listening that affirms their dignity. It is through this commitment that we earn the right to move on to a second essential element of faith talk: “Jesus talk”!

## What to Expect

This resource has three objectives:

1. First, to provide an underlying rationale for engaging young people in faith talk, anchored in the pedagogy of God (which may sound very heady, but in fact permeates effective catechesis and faith formation efforts). I hope to convince you of the necessity of authentic faith talk and strengthen your resolve to embrace faith talk as a primary component of your ministry.
2. Second, to suggest ways of creating opportunities for facilitated faith conversations with young people. We’ll look at ways to integrate faith talk into the various components of your ministry, revising or even rebuilding your ministry map.
3. Third, to embrace accompaniment—rooted in intentional, nonjudgmental listening—as a ministerial approach in our pastoral outreach to, with, and for young people.

# PART 1

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## Why Faith Talk Is Needed Now!

There is a dramatic rise in young people leaving their churches, synagogues, and mosques. While there is no one ministerial “fix” for this trend, we can change practices that contribute to the disaffiliation of youth. One of the shifts we need to make is from telling young people what to believe, to engaging in a true dialogue with them about their faith journey.

Here’s an example. I was walking through my parish rectory and stopped to ask Renee, a fourteen-year-old, Catholic high school student who was answering the parish phones, whether she was coming to the Advent prayer service. She replied, “No, I don’t believe in God and all that stuff.” And in a moment of grace, I said, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” And she did. Right there in the rectory hallway. After listening to her, I said, “Renee, I don’t believe in that God either. Let me tell you about the God I believe in.” That was the start of an eight-year conversation and journey together.

Let’s take a closer look at the research undergirding the need for faith talk and consider some core principles needed to address it.

## Why the Urgency?

From 2015 to 2017, Saint Mary’s Press conducted a research study of young adults who had been baptized into the Catholic faith, but who no longer identify as Catholic. When asked at what age they had stopped identifying with the Catholic Church, 74 percent said between the ages of 10 and 20, with the median age being 13 years old. The study, called *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, identified a variety of factors contributing to these young adults’ making the serious decision to no longer consider themselves Catholic. Follow-up interviews highlighted the complex and varied realities of those who have made a thoughtful, discerning, and often deeply reflective choice to disaffiliate—a choice typically not made in haste or lightly. These young adults provide us with important insights into their spiritual and religious journeys.

The study’s executive summary states, “To listen and to hear the stories of those who disaffiliate from the Church are essential and constitutive dimensions of what it means to be a community of faith. The

dynamics of disaffiliation can't be sufficiently understood when limited to statistics rendered on bar graphs, or generalized, categorized groupings. Each person who disaffiliates has a name, a story, and longings of the heart and mind, and all are grateful for the opportunity to have their story heard." (*Going, Going, Gone*, p. 7)

One young adult, when asked if we could interview her about young adults and their disaffiliation from the Church, said, "Finally! Finally, the Church is talking with us, not about us." Another interviewee stated, "I'm glad to actually finally tell my story. I have never really sat down and told anyone. Thank you for listening." Clearly, many disaffiliated young adults feel their voices have never been heard, that no one in the Church has cared enough to ask for their story, and then to listen.

There is an urgency to create opportunities for our young people to share their stories, to be genuinely heard, and to engage in God talk. All of this requires vision, skills, and a ministry map.

### ***Going, Going, Gone*** **Some Key Findings from the Study**

- 12.8% of all U.S. young adults, ages 18 to 25, are former Catholics.
- 6.8% of all U.S. teens, ages 15–17, are former Catholics.
- The majority of Catholic youth (74%) who disaffiliate make that decision between 10 and 20 years old, with the median age being 13 years old.
- Half of formerly Catholic teens and young adults are male, and half are female.
- The single largest religious affiliation among disaffiliated teen and young adult Catholics is no religious affiliation (i.e., "Nones").



## Benefits of Faith Talk

Faith talk includes verbalization—speaking one’s beliefs, questions, values, dreams. Reflection activities, journaling exercises, silent meditation, and similar techniques are certainly valuable and appropriate for many faith formation settings and activities. However, there is great value and impact in creating opportunities for young people to verbalize their inner thoughts; to say out loud what they believe, don’t believe, struggle with, and question. Because language underpins our access to reality, if young people cannot articulate their experience of faith, faith may not seem real in their lives. When they have opportunities for conversations about faith, young people learn to speak the language of faith for themselves.

There is great benefit for the individual young person in putting into words what may be fuzzy or unclear thoughts, images, concepts, and symbols. *It is not mine until I can say it out loud.* When they express their beliefs, questions, doubts, and hopes, those beliefs become theirs and the questions and doubts can be explored. This benefit is multiplied when this sharing happens in a group of young people. Not only does the individual gain clarity about his or her faith musings, but everyone in the group benefits from hearing firsthand their peers’ experiences and insights.

It is important that this articulation happens with people and in settings that young people associate with “church.” When those of us who represent the Church express genuine interest in a young person’s beliefs, questions, and spiritual experiences, we affirm that young person’s dignity. When we listen to young people’s doubts and disagreements with Church teaching without judgment, we affirm their spiritual journey. Additionally, engaging in God talk with caring, faith-filled adults who witness to the presence of Jesus in their lives is a powerful and profound experience.

**If young people cannot articulate their experience of faith, faith may not seem real in their lives.**

The benefits from engaging young people in faith talk are obvious. To do so effectively, however, certain underlying factors need to be understood, skills need to be mastered, and techniques need to be practiced.

## Core Principles for Effective Faith Talk

### Core Principle 1: Experience Rich but Language Poor

Throughout my long career and vocation in pastoral ministry, I have been guided by an underlying principle that adults are *experience rich and language poor*. This insight has shaped my approach to ministry training, teaching in undergraduate and graduate ministry programs, and leading adult faith formation. I start with the assumption that adults bring their years of experience to a ministry setting and my role is to help them find a language for that experience. When I do this well, participants better understand what they already intuitively know to be true and are able to connect their insights with the language of the Church.

I believe the same about young people. *Young people are experience rich—especially in their experience of God—but language poor*. Several years ago, the Gallup organization released a study that said one in three young people reports a significant, personal experience of God by age sixteen. This finding raises two very important questions:

- Do young people have the language to talk about and reflect on their experiences of God?
- Do young people have a faith community that assists them in integrating these experiences into their life and worldview?

Assuming young people lack this language, I believe that the role of the pastoral minister is to enable young people to find the words for such God talk. Rather than seeing our role as “bringing God to young people,” then, we are to assist young people in naming their experience of a God they find already active in their lives. And in this naming, their experience of God can be integrated into their lives and shared with others, thereby strengthening the faith of their peers.

In this dialogue there is a genuine mutuality. Young people and pastoral ministers are partners in moving it forward. Pastoral ministers must

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exhibit a willingness to learn about the movement and action of God in the life of a young person. We must recognize that this movement has preceded our ministry in the lives and the culture of those we are seeking to evangelize. On the other side, young people must be willing to share their spiritual experiences and faith beliefs. This can be intimidating and requires a great deal of trust in the listener.

## Core Principle 2: The Language of Relationships

This is my second core principle: Young people already have a language, *the language of relationships*. Pastoral ministers know that effective ministry with young people is always relational. A traditional axiom in catechetical ministry, religious education, and youth faith formation reminds us that “we have to earn the right to be heard.” It is by entering into relationships of respect, trust, and acceptance that we earn the right to minister. And now it may be that we must earn the right to listen to young people’s story. The relational dimension of pastoral ministry reminds us that until young people know us, they may not hear us, and they may not allow us to enter into their story.

The mother of one of our young people in my Confirmation class asked her daughter why she was excited about coming to class, and her daughter responded, “Mom, they like us. They really like us!” Young people know when we really like them. They know intuitively when our main purpose in entering into relationship is because we genuinely respect and accept them for who they are, and not because we just want to impart knowledge to them. I understand the challenge and the pressure of trying to meet catechetical objectives or course expectations. However, I believe that when we authentically “engage their hearts,” we will have wonderful opportunities to “educate their heads.”

In the language of relationships, the importance of active listening cannot be overemphasized. Foremost, this means giving young people our full attention when they speak to us. Making eye contact, having an open posture, and smiling will let them know they have your attention. Verbal affirmations, such as, “That’s

In the language of relationships, the importance of active listening cannot be overemphasized.

interesting, tell me more,” will encourage dialogue. And never let your first response be, “Now let me tell you what you should believe”!

### **Core Principle 3: The Pedagogy of God**

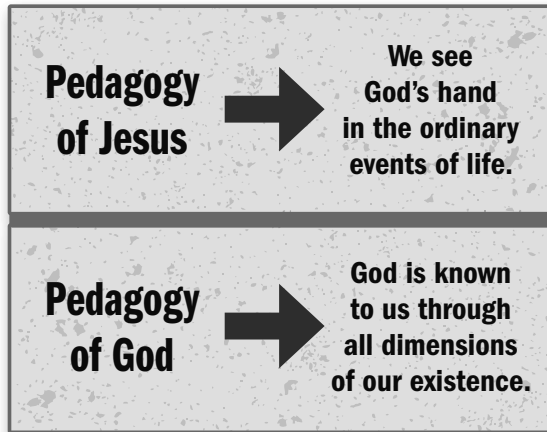
My third core principle is this: There is a pedagogy of God (see par. 139 of the *General Directory for Catechesis*). Underlying our rationale for engaging young people in faith talk is our understanding of how God is known by us. I believe:

- There is a God who created the universe.
- This God wants to communicate with us.
- This God does communicate with us through human events and inspired words (i.e., Scripture). (*General Directory of Catechesis*, #38)
- We often miss God’s self-communication.

This is the pedagogy of God—that God is known to us through all dimensions of our existence. The created world, our lived experiences, reflecting on our past, and looking ahead to a future still being revealed are all avenues for God’s communication. As Christians, we believe that God does not remain aloof, rather God engages the world with meaningful love, bringing the mystery near. This is most obvious in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Meister Eckert is attributed with writing, “Jesus Christ is God, spelling himself (sic) out in a language man can understand.”

Yet we might miss God’s self-communication, perhaps because we have been undereducated in the ways that God does indeed communicate with us. Obviously, young people need to hear that God communicates through the ordinary experiences of their lives. Less obviously, young people need to reflect on these ordinary experiences to be able to verbalize these encounters with Mystery and the insights they bring. Facilitating this can be as simple as asking young people to pause and reflect on their day and to share where they encountered God or love or beauty or wonder. Taking the time to verbalize these insights and share them with others allows others to see the pedagogy of God unfolding in their own lives.

There is a profound impediment to ‘having the words’ to speak about faith and God. *None of our words can capture the reality of God.* That is where more than 3,000 years of religious wisdom and tradition comes to aid us! Religion provides a language to talk about that which is beyond language. Catholicism provides the language of Tradition, ritual, symbols, story, music, art, as well as of Scripture, sacrament, sacramentals, and sacramentality. The pastoral challenge is to enable young people to first find their words to name and own their experience. Then we can introduce them to the language of the faith community, deepening their ability to engage in faith talk. Practical ways to foster these two movements will be explored in Part 2.



*The pedagogy of Jesus builds on the pedagogy of God.*

## Core Principle 4: Pedagogy of Jesus

This brings me to my fourth, and final, core principle: The pedagogy of God is most fully visible in the pedagogy of Jesus (see par. 140 of the *General Directory for Catechesis*). We are challenged to not just teach Jesus and what Jesus taught, but to teach as he taught. In Scripture, Jesus is described as “teacher” and as “teaching” 150 times. Catechists and parents are challenged to imitate the pedagogy of Jesus Christ. We need to make Jesus’ pedagogy our own, by focusing on it as evident in his public ministry, especially the parables. His overall dynamic was to lead people from life to faith to life.

Jesus did so by engaging in the ordinary and everyday of people's lives: fishing, farming, home, meals, work, prayer, children, and family. He caused people to reflect on their reality, to question, often to "see" the ordinary in a whole new way. He taught with authority (Mk 1:22) and with a confidence in the Father and encouraged people to see for themselves, with personal conviction. And he challenged people to make a decision—to follow his "way" as disciples.

Perhaps one of the best-known Scripture stories is the account of Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus after the Resurrection (Lk 24:13–35). In this account, two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem, following the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus suddenly appears and walks with them, asking what they are discussing. He walks with them, listening to their traumatic story and shattered vision, hearing of their broken hopes, confusion, and desperation. Jesus then breaks open the scriptures and points out the references to the Messiah, to crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples must have been stirred deeply, for they invite Jesus to spend the night. It is at table that evening, when Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, that the disciples' eyes are opened and they see. Jesus disappears, rather dramatically. The disciples describe their experience in these words: "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"

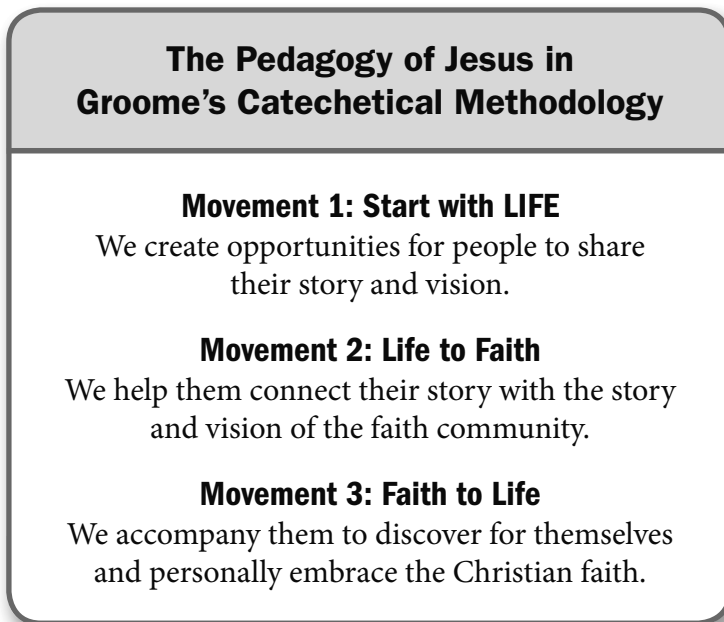
The Emmaus account illustrates the three-step pedagogy of Jesus that serves as a methodology for pastoral ministry.

- Jesus first invites the disciples to share their story, with their hopes, their fears, their disappointments, and their confusions.
- Jesus then breaks open the scriptures, the story of the faith community's relationship and experience with God, connecting the story of the faith community with the experience of the disciples.
- In the blessing and breaking of the bread, the disciples 'see' and move to a deeper embrace of their faith.

It is important for us to notice what happens first in the Emmaus story. Many ministers want to jump immediately to breaking open the Scripture and connecting experience to our faith tradition. But Jesus

begins with a simple question, “What are you discussing?” that opens the door to the disciples’ naming their experience and Jesus’ profound listening as they do so. This creates the opportunity for Jesus to connect Scripture and the faith tradition to what they already know in their hearts.

This pedagogy of Jesus can be expressed succinctly with this phrase: “from life to faith to life.” The phrase describes a catechetical methodology proposed by Dr. Tom Groome from Boston College. His methodology can be outlined as the three movements in this chart:



## Midwife or Adoption Agent?

As we consider both the pedagogy of God and the pedagogy of Jesus, as well as the implications for pastoral ministry with young people, we remember that our ultimate goal is fostering mature, adult disciples of Jesus Christ. Just as importantly, we remember that faith is a journey, not a destination. The disciples thought Emmaus was their destination, but their encounter with Jesus puts them back on the journey. There is no time line for this journey by our young people. It doesn’t end with

Confirmation, with high school graduation, or even with adulthood, whenever that occurs! The challenge is to foster their commitment to the journey.

This lifelong journey toward a deepening relationship with Jesus has both a personal and communal dimension. The personal dimension involves the development of young people's individual faith identity and includes deepening their understanding of God, their relationship with Jesus, and their personal spiritual life, while forming a principled, gospel-based, moral value system reflected in their lifestyle, relationships, and behavior. The communal dimension involves the development of their Catholic Christian faith identity and includes deepening their understanding of our Tradition, its doctrinal expression, and its application in our complex society, with responsible participation in the life, work, worship, and mission of the faith community.

An apt image is the cross, where the vertical bar represents our personal relationship with God and the horizontal bar represents our relationship with the faith community. Combining the vertical and the horizontal, the personal and communal dimensions of faith, provides a comprehensive vision for authentic faith development, as well as for our pastoral ministry with young people.

These two dimensions of personal and communal faith point toward dual roles for pastoral ministers in catechetical, educational, and youth ministry settings. We are called to be midwives and adoption agents.

The midwife role encourages young people to give birth to their personal and individual faith identity. The midwife assists young people in finding their own words as they struggle to deepen their understanding of God, to strengthen their personal relationship with Jesus, to develop a personal spiritual life, and to develop healthy lifestyles and moral values. The midwife helps give birth to the faith life of young people and supports the vertical bar of personal faith. The emphasis for ministry at this point is on truly listening to young people, without prematurely foreclosing that dialogue by answering every question or responding to every doubt.

The adoption agent helps place children into families. The adoption agent aspect of ministry helps young people become a part of the Catholic Christian family of faith. It enables young people to take on for themselves the wisdom, values, lifestyle, and beliefs of the Catholic Christian

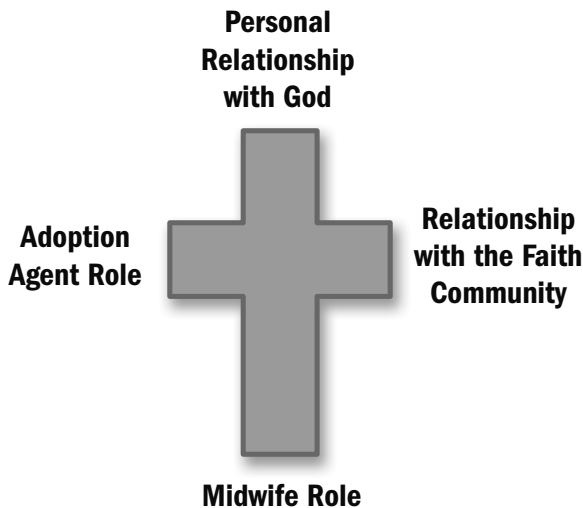


community. Supporting the horizontal bar, the adoption agent strengthens the communal dimension of one's faith identity, introducing young people to the faith community's words, beliefs, and practices.

The challenge for pastoral ministers is to develop a confidence and a competence for midwife and adoption agent roles and to discern when each role is appropriate and necessary. Both roles are essential in pastoral ministry with young people, as we work to connect their stories, experiences, and words with the stories, experiences, and words of the faith community. Many of us are very skilled as adoption agents and not as skilled as midwives. Much of our ministry training and formation has been on how to teach Scripture and doctrine. That worked very well for us in the past. But in this moment, with this new generation, we must become highly skilled as midwives. We must become skilled at encouraging young people to talk about their faith life and in truly hearing and accepting their stories.

**In this moment, with this new generation, we must become highly skilled as midwives [of faith].**

### **Midwife or Adoption Agent?**



## For Your Reflection

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how comfortable am I engaging in life and faith conversations with young people? Why am I giving myself that number?
2. What do I suspect young people are not talking about with me? Is there anything I could do to change that?

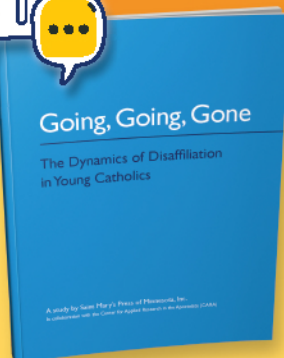
3. Where have I been a “midwife” in my ministry with young people?  
Where have I been an “adoption agent”?

4. What makes me confident in being a midwife in my ministry with young people? What makes me uncomfortable?

# Faith Talk



In *Faith Talk*, Dr. Bob McCarty challenges catechists, teachers, and youth ministers to examine their ministry practices in light of the research findings reported in *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Youth Catholics* (Saint Mary's Press, 2017). This research into young people's disaffiliation with the Catholic faith is a wake-up call for all those who minister within the Church. *Faith Talk* is a guide for the shift from an emphasis on telling young people what to believe, to focusing on accompanying young people on their faith journey. Dr. McCarty provides a vision, a methodology, and practical tools for this shift, starting by deeply listening to young people's experiences, their questions, and their concerns about life, spirituality, and the Church.



## About the Author

Robert J. McCarty, DMin, is a pastoral consultant, trainer, and author presenting workshops, retreats, and ministry formation internationally and around the United States. The former director of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, he is also an adjunct faculty at the University of Dallas and the Catholic University of America. Bob is a volunteer in the catechetical and youth ministry program at his home parish, St. Francis of Assisi, in Fulton, MD.



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[www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org)

ISBN 978-1-64121-016-4



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