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Forum: How to Listen, How to Speak, What to Say. "Sticking with Catholicism"

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HOW TO LISTEN, HOW TO SPEAK, WHAT TO SAY

The theme that we, the teaching generation, must listen carefully to the “millennial generation” comes across strongly in the interview with Donna Freitas; and the voices of the students come through strongly in the four student essays as they feel themselves pulled between the security and service, casual sex and responsible commitment, the Internet’s benefits and abuse, the demands of the world and the demands of faith. We thought it would be good to consult four writers who were, in general, older than the students and younger than the professors, on how to break through some of the generational barriers that stand between “us” and our students who sometimes seem — in avoidance of a religious commitment — to have sealed themselves inside an electronic bubble. Ross Romero, S.J., ordained in 2005, won a teaching award in philosophy at Boston College last year; James Riordan, S.J., who just joined the Jesuits in 2007, has been working at Detroit Mercy; Jeff Guhin, writes often for the website TheBustedHalo.com on religion and young people; and the well-traveled Elizabeth Reavey, who wrote her undergraduate honors thesis on an AIDS hospice in Kenya, is now driving through Latin America. **RASsj**

Forum



STICKING WITH CATHOLICISM

Ross Romero, S.J.

Shortly before his death, Southern writer Walker Percy accounted for his reticence in giving a direct answer to this question: Why are you a Catholic? “Novelists,” he says, “are disinclined to say anything straight out, especially about themselves, since their stock in trade is indirection. ... If anybody says anything straight out it is apt to be one of their characters, a character moreover for which they have not much use.” Almost twenty years ago, I graduated from a Catholic university. I questioned and wandered, but I tried to keep practicing this religion. Later, I entered a religious order and have been sticking with it. The reason for this astonishing achievement is unlikely to generate much interest. Like one of Percy’s more humdrum characters, I resort to direct speech in accounting for it: I stick with Catholicism because I believe that what the Catholic Church proposes is true. From my experiences as a student and a teacher of theology and philosophy, I offer five suggestions for giving students a fighting chance to do the same by fostering their search for truth.

1) *Don't make the Catholic classroom a cafeteria.*

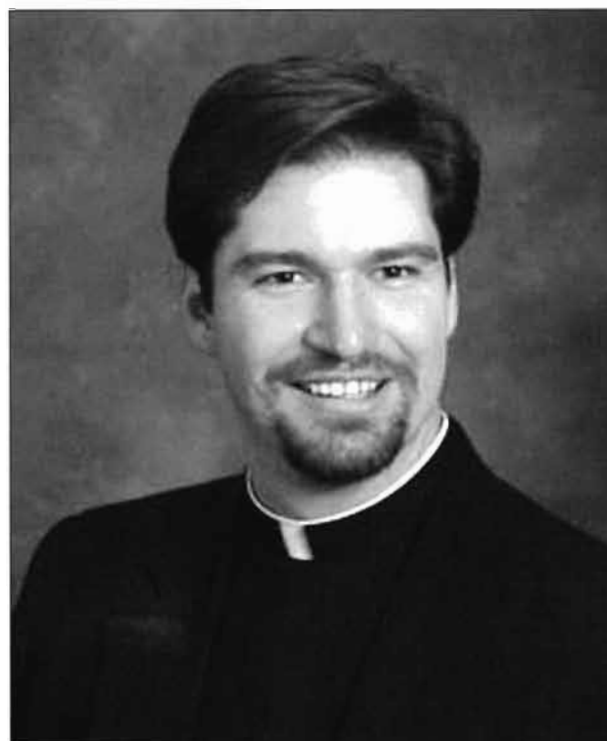
Last semester in a service learning course in theology and philosophy my students read selections from the U.S. Bishop's "Economic Justice for All." They asked trenchant questions about economic practicalities, but they also asked about the church's credibility as a teacher of morals. The church has a lot of money; shouldn't it give it away? The church teaches not to treat certain members of society like non-persons; doesn't it treat homosexuals this way? I believed that it would be possible to discuss economic justice in a vacuum, but I learned how quickly such issues lead to discussions about sexual morality and church authority. What struck me, however, was how surprised many students were to hear the deeper reasons for the church's teachings. "Even if they end up disagreeing, how many have actually had a conversation with someone who understands these teachings?" I wondered. Our classrooms, as well as the rest of the programs on campus, should strive to offer a full-course meal of Catholic teaching.

2) *Make Catholicism visible.*

While an undergraduate, I took a philosophy course called "Metaphysics." In a Catholic university, Aristotle and Aquinas should have been on the syllabus, but the atheist professor assigned three books by Nietzsche and seven demanding essays of phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas. I loved it. The professor became one of my favorites because he challenged me to deepen my understanding of responsibility. I don't want to overestimate post-modernism's grip or underestimate God's mercy, but I doubt I would have stuck with Catholicism if I hadn't also had courses about human nature and epistemology from Jesuits and other believers. It was important for me to see and hear people who were outwardly committed to both thinking *and* Catholicism.

3) *Do the justice that does faith.*

Service is the way to faith for many students. They continue to bring their passion for justice and generous heart to our universities. Philosophical and theological reflection on service sharpens their understanding of justice, but it must be leavened with reflection on the Gospels and sacramental theology. If it doesn't then it will not provide bread for their journey.



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4) *Point beyond the pew.*

As an undergraduate, a Jesuit led a discussion group on current events in my residence hall. Readings from some Catholic periodicals were required for this non-credit discussion. Amazingly, we did it. I learned from this that Catholicism cared about more than just religion. This made me love it all the more.

5) *Truth is in the telling.*

Each search for truth is an unfolding story. When we give our students critical tools, historical resources, a caring presence, and pose challenging questions, we foster their telling. Percy concludes that "a smart-mouthed answer" to why you are a Catholic is this: What else is there? At the end of my life, nothing will make me happier than recalling the faces of students who with a mixture of humility and joy can give a well-informed, "smart"-mouthed answer for themselves. ■

Ross Romero, S.J., was ordained in 2005 in New Orleans. He has taught at Spring Hill College and Boston College where he is currently a doctoral candidate in philosophy and a residence hall chaplain.