Introduction

Faith can be defined in many different ways. From the religious side it is a gift and an infused virtue. According to James Fowler, from the human side, faith is a process of handing on story, values, and beliefs through the rituals, stories, symbols and witness of both living and dead members of a believing community. He describes faith as a dynamic process which is:

- a way of knowing
- a way of valuing
- a way of seeing

According to Fowler, faith permeates and informs our way of being in relation to our neighbors, and to the causes and companions of our lives. It is the primary motivating power in the journey of self and springs from a community of values. This segment is meant to help you reflect on different stages of faith development. When reading it, reflect on your own journey and those close to you. Begin by reflecting or journaling on the first question. Then read the article "Faith Development" and jot down your responses to the reflection questions.

How does your faith today differ from your faith as a child?

Article: Faith Development

Read the following article and respond to the questions:

Along with John Westerhoff Fowler’s research alerted us to the concept that faith in human beings developed in stages that are helpful for catechists to understand as they work to enhance and call forth religious faith in those to be catechized, whether they are children or adults.

As a result of much research Fowler proposes six stages of faith development. Actually they relate closely to Kohlberg’s moral developmental stages (see article on moral development) as well as other theories of human development.

In the first three stages of faith development, people rely on some authority outside themselves for their beliefs.

- Young children, during the first stage of faith development (intuitive-projective), follow the beliefs of their parents and /or significant adults. They tend to imagine or fantasize angels or other religious figures in stories much as they do characters in fairy tales.
- In the second stage of faith development (mythical-literal), children tend to respond to religious stories and rituals literally, rather than symbolically. As they move through adolescence to young adulthood, their beliefs continue to be based on authority focused outside themselves.
- In the third stage of faith development (synthetic-conventional), individuals tend to conform to a belief, but do not do much self-reflection or examination of their beliefs. Many people remain at this stage their whole life.

In the next three stages of faith development, persons begin to move away from reliance on outside authority for their beliefs.

- Those who move to the fourth stage of faith development (individuative-reflective) begin to shift from dependence on others’ spiritual beliefs to development of their own. They no longer rely on external sources of authority. Individuals at this point choose beliefs, values, and relationships important to their self-fulfillment. They are no longer defined by the groups to which they belong.
- In the fifth stage of faith development (conjunctive), persons still rely on their own views but move from self-preoccupation or from dependence on fixed truths, to acceptance and tolerance of others. They see the value in serving others.
- Individuals who move to the sixth and last stage of faith development (universalizing) search for universal values, such as unconditional love and justice for everyone no matter what. Self-preservation is not important to them. Service is most important. Mother Teresa or Gandhi might be examples of people who have developed to this stage. Not too many of us do.

Westerhoff gives a similar but simpler and more religious framework for describing faith development. His four stage theory also is a movement from external to internal to being for others:

- Experienced I take on the faith of my family (pre-school, primary age)
• Affiliative I begin to identify with the values of my peers and the larger community (middle grades–early adolescence. Many remain at this stage and never have reason to move from it)
• Searching Something happens that makes an individual question his or her former beliefs, and he or she begins to search for meaning and value outside the “faith of their [his/her] childhood.” Many remain in this searching stage. Others endure a period of searching and integrating, and move to the next stage.
• Owned I own my faith because I have internalized it not because of outside "authority."

Most of the children you will work with are probably in the first group of stages of either theorist. It is important to think about the fact that in a catechetical session, a child experiences a community of Catholic beliefs and values. For many of them that community strengthens and adds to the Catholic identity of their family and their family’s practices. For others who have not experienced that kind of "faithing," at home, it is an initiation into a community of religious values and identity.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe your own faith journey in relation to the stages of faith development?
2. How does this article help you understand the faith development of young people in your group?