

## **Speaking of Liturgy: Education and Formation through and for Worship**

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On Palm Sunday eighteen days ago I paid a visit to the country of my youth. I was visiting my parents on the East Coast, and so on that day I worshiped with them at their church, First Presbyterian. I've never belonged to that particular congregation, but the denominational ethos was familiar. Visiting my family of origin, I had reentered my denomination of origin as well.

This is a vital congregation. As we arrived the pews were filling rapidly, the people were friendly, the mood was positive, and the organist played the prelude well. When the service began, the hymn was one many of you probably also sang that morning, "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." As the choir processed, we sang heartily in our pews. After the choir came about twenty children of kindergarten age, who continued to march around and around the rectangles where we adults were standing, waving little bundles of palm fronds while the congregation looked on and smiled. Then came prayers and readings and a very fine sermon. Having read Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the preacher called attention to the crowds. "People like moments that seem triumphant," he said. "Crowds gather and cheer when they think they have found a winner. But follow the crowds a little further into this story," he said, "and you will see them dwindle and then disappear as Jesus dies alone. Discipleship is not fulfilled in the fun moments or in upbeat times of earthly victory. Discipleship leads to the cross. On this day we turn a corner and see this plainly. We make the transition from the one to the other. That is why," he said, "we call this Sunday both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday."

I listened carefully and appreciatively. I was glad my parents are in a vital congregation where they hear good preaching, and I found this minister's words edifying. The sermon introduced relevant findings of recent New Testament scholarship and a challenging suggestion about where the people of this congregation might enter the way of the cross. At the same time, however, part of my mind and heart were back in Valparaiso. I imagined people crammed into the narthex of the Chapel of the Resurrection—people from the university and from the wider community, along with hundreds of visitors who would be attending a

Lutheran school basketball tournament held on campus that weekend. I knew there would be quite a crowd.

On that morning in that narthex in Valparaiso, worshipers were having the experience of being a crowd, an experience that begins when you become aware something is happening up there near the doors that you can't quite see. Being in that narthex is like jostling for space along the route of a parade. You crane your neck and sharpen your ears as somebody says something you can't quite hear, all the while trying not to lose track of the people you came with. And then come the shouts—"Hosanna! Hosanna!"—and a great procession takes shape, with balloons and palms for everyone, not just for the little children. You are carried along and finally enter in, not only into the nave but also into Jerusalem. There things change. In front of the assembled people, purple and bright red paraments and vestments are removed and scarlet ones are put on. The timbre and pace of the music change too, and solemnity begins to settle over the crowd. You can feel it in the muscles of your face, and you release your balloon, which slowly rises with the others toward the ceiling. And then you hear the story of Jesus' passion, from his entry into the city on the back of a donkey to his death on a hill outside the city walls. And then you share a meal, taking this death and this story into your body as bread and wine. (Reminding you of this liturgy, I feel a little bit like Egeria, reporting back from Valparaiso as she once reported to friends in Europe her Holy Week experience in Jerusalem.)

Worthy Christian people and authentic Christian worship were present in both of these assemblies, something the ELCA and the Presbyterian Church (USA) officially recognized last year. Yet the liturgical contrast was vivid. And on that same morning, we may be sure, there were many other worthy Christian assemblies scattered along the miles between that Eastern city and this Midwestern town where the contrast would be more vivid still.

I introduce this contrast as a way of trying to make distinct two activities that in fact exist commingled in the life of every congregation: the activities of education and formation. At First Presbyterian the emphasis was on "education," even in the midst of worship. Here the weight was on equipping people for Christian living by way of verbal explication. That service required worshipers to lend our ears but not our legs and hands and bellies. The pastor wore the black robe of the scholar, a costume adopted by many sixteenth-century Reformers and retained by most Presbyterians across the centuries as the basic preaching garb. Indeed, if this pastor was ordained before 1983, he was ordained as a "teaching elder," the official

title of Presbyterian pastors until the most recent merger. The relative simplicity of this liturgy was born in the humanistic textual scholarship of the sixteenth century. Yet attention to the liturgical calendar also shaped this observance of Palm/Passion Sunday—attention that is growing within the Reformed tradition, as leaders there rediscover the beauty and the formative power of liturgical rites that are like mother’s milk to you. This pastor, through the explication in his sermon, was educating this congregation in the meaning of their observance.

At the Chapel of the Resurrection, on the other hand, the emphasis that day was more squarely on “formation.” Worshipers were invited to enter the story, to walk into it, to shout it, to become part of it. This dynamic was not commented upon; instead it was embodied. Moreover, the story entered that day would continue in that place all week long. In the ensuing days, that nave became the upper room, the garden of Gethsemane, the court of Pilate, the temple pavement, the place of the skull, the borrowed and finally empty tomb, and the lonely room where the anxious disciples would wait to hear the word of Jesus’ Resurrection. Education? Formation? Anticipating this lecture, I lived through Holy Week this year alert to the distinct yet thoroughly mutual emphases on education and formation in Christian life and liturgy. The title of this talk was chosen by Mary Collins, who was to have spoken today. It turns out the other speakers and workshops and worship at this institute have also been exploring this question, implicitly or explicitly. Moreover, the catechumenate itself, I am learning, constitutes a powerful combination of instruction and entering in, of teaching and touching, of education and formation.

The institute theme “Forming Christians” has so far led us to be more explicit about formation than about education. That’s fair enough when liturgy is our chief concern, for liturgy embodies formation at its most focused. The distinction between education and formation is fairly artificial: education always forms those who learn, and formation always educates those who enter its storied colors and rhythms. Both are essential in the life of every Christian and the life of every worshiping community. And yet in a cultural situation in which both education and formation in faith are in jeopardy, it is important to be explicit and intentional about each one, and especially to be explicit and intentional about doing each one in a way that is supportive of the other.

Our context is not Christendom, and contemporary culture will not form persons in Christian faith. This observation is frequently offered in gatherings of church leaders to account for institutional losses or to

advocate strategies for growth. I suggest that it also deserves attention as a comment on the quality and character of that which occupies the American mind. Many people are poor in images of a way of life that is in a large and important sense *good*. Instead of imagining a way of life abundant, they absorb commercial images of material abundance that foster a sense of “the good life” as being rich in things but not necessarily rich in mercy and justice.

Offering a richer diet of words and images that bear the Christian story, acknowledge mystery, and foster truthful and profound hopes is a large part of the work of contemporary Christian education and formation. Thus Christian education and formation run against the cultural grain at many points. (“To what must you die?” Christian formation asks.) As we take up this work, we will need also to address the gap between religious experience and intellectual grounding that has opened during modernity—a gap that would have been incomprehensible in the ancient church and indeed in the ancient world as a whole. The catechumenate may offer ways of integrating experience and concepts that address this very central division in contemporary Christian life. If this is so, perhaps we can learn from the catechumenate itself, and from what has been going on in this institute, about patterns of education and formation with implications throughout the life of the church. I’ll explore these possibilities in three parts: 1) formation; 2) education; and 3) their mutual dependence, each upon the other.

### *Formation*

For Christians formation is the conversion of life that occurs as we live our way into the promises made in our baptism. Like baptism itself, it is physical; it includes the whole person, body and all. It is incarnate; you touch and you are touched. It moves through time to certain rhythms of the day, the week, and the year. It adopts certain postures—upright in Eastertide—both literally and metaphorically. In formation the story of a single person’s life is woven into the story of God in Jesus Christ. Through Christian formation, we become joined to that story—past, present, and future.

Formation entails participation in the story of God in Christ—the kind of participation that happens on Palm Sunday in the Chapel of the Resurrection. Note that adults and children can take part side by side. (This realization leads me to wonder whether we should also don our bathrobes and take part in Christmas pageants! I suppose there are certain

stories and certain times when children's formation deserves to be highlighted; but please note that this kind of participation can also embrace the rest of us.) The Easter Vigil also draws worshipers into the story, a grand story that runs from the beginning of time into our own day and on to a glorious fulfillment. In this and other liturgies, formative power relies partly on numerous clues that this story is your story, this story is my story, as invitations to join it are offered in music, in sights, in smells, in touch. We hold a candle lit from the new fire of Easter; we touch the water in the font; we experience the dimness of light and later its brightness; we are fed. I know some who think there is an awful lot of standing up and sitting down to be done; but this too involves our bodies, not only by helping us stay awake so late at night but also by embodying our participation and response. Here is a model of formation not only for worship but also for living. What can we do to hand a candle to someone, to invite them to stand and participate, once the service is over, in stewardship or service? How do we draw people into that part of the story as well?

The Hispanic Roman Catholic community provides another powerful example of formative participation in the story of God in the liturgies of *Las Posadas*, which are enacted on the nine nights before Christmas. *Las Posadas* was developed by a Spanish missionary in the sixteenth century as a way of teaching the Christian story to new converts in the Americas. Now, after some cultural adaptation, it takes place on the streets of some North American cities each December. "Posada" means "shelter," and the liturgy enacts Joseph and Mary's search for a place to stay as the time approaches for the child to be born. Some participants sing and act the part of Joseph, while others represent Mary and the innkeeper. Moving through the city streets, the holy parents knock on one door after another but are told they may not come in. On the last night they are finally admitted; they enter and break a piñata and celebrate the birth of Christ. Participating in that story, worshipers are not only learning about Luke 2 by translating it into a quasi-theatrical form. They are also remembering that Jesus and his parents were once homeless refugees, and they are affirming the practice of Christian hospitality—a matter of special importance when many in the crowd are themselves newly arrived in the United States. It is not coincidental, I am told, that the Hispanic community has an exceptionally low rate of homelessness; in other words, the story continues to be enacted beyond the liturgy itself. Similarly, on Good Friday in many cities Hispanic Roman Catholic churches stage outdoor passion plays that process through the streets of the city. In

Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, these processions stop to commemorate the stations of the cross on corners where violence has occurred. Such processions draw not only worshipers but also the parish neighborhood into the redemptive rhythms of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

Participation, then, is a crucial part of Christian formation. With this point, however, comes a second one: what matters is not simply participation itself, but participation together with others. Christian formation entails a joining to a body that is at once local, global, and transgenerational: the body of Christ. The shared quality of Christian formation is countercultural in a time when many people are seeking spirituality through private meditation or books they read by themselves. A wonderful treatment of this communal dimension comes in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, a book about the experience of those who lived in the Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwald, Germany, in the 1930s. As Bonhoeffer guided this small community of teachers and students into a way of life that would foster hope and trust in Jesus Christ while also preparing them to resist German Christianity, one of his chief methods was unison singing. "It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not I who sing, but the church," he wrote. "However, as a member of the church, I may share in its song. Thus all true singing together must serve to widen our spiritual horizon. It must enable us to recognize our small community as a member of the great Christian church on earth ... and must help us willingly and joyfully to take our place in the song of the church with our singing, be it feeble or good."<sup>2</sup> Notice his conviction regarding participation with others includes not only those who are close at hand but also a great cloud of witnesses, a communion that transcends the generations and the ages.

Doing together matters. But it's not just calisthenics. Perhaps, at the local level, it's more like a barn raising. It requires careful maneuvering and coordination with the brothers and sisters who are at hand. If you make a false move, you might get some bumps and bruises, but you know there is no chance you could get it done alone. Or perhaps it's like playing your part in a symphony that is in the repertoire of every orchestra; when you take up your instrument, you become part of a great tradition that includes, over time, millions of other musicians.

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<sup>1</sup>Ana Maria Pineda, "Hospitality," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 29–42.

<sup>2</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtress (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 68.

Togetherness of this kind includes an alertness to generations. Because formation is an organic, often physical, and sometimes nonverbal process, it can happen partly through osmosis, through the absorption of movements and feelings, through the mimetic acquisition of skills. Even a detached observer might learn certain things are done here and certain things are not. However, formation happens best in the company of those who know what is going on and are willing to share that explicitly. Practicing alongside them, observing, learning, one picks up not only the language but also the body language.

Third, formation takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. This is so, of course, within a deliberate process of initiation such as the catechumenate. It's even more true as formation continues across an entire lifetime. Conversion to Christian living takes practice, but even with lots of practice there's something mysterious and beyond our control about being formed. Like someone learning to play a musical instrument, we will be off-key at points. And no matter how good we get, we'll never play perfectly. But then that isn't our purpose. There's always something in formation that is beyond us, that comes from God. We must pray in the end not that we will master our instruments but that Christ will play beautiful, or at least serviceable, music through us.

Fourth, formation is formation into and for something beyond itself. It's not Christian formation if it's not formation into a Christian purpose. Paul Nelson said this well on Tuesday. The content of formation matters deeply. A definition of spiritual formation offered by George Lindbeck shows how tricky it can be to engage formation at this level. "Looked at non-theologically," Lindbeck writes,

spiritual formation may be described as the deep and personally committed appropriation of a comprehensive and coherent outlook on life and the world. From this perspective, those who are maturely humanistic or maturely Marxist, for example, are in their own way spiritually well-formed. The spiritually mature are not simply socialized into behaving under standard conditions as is expected of members of their group, but they have to a significant degree developed the capacities and dispositions to think, feel, and act in accordance with their world view, no matter what the circumstances. They have, in Aristotelian language, the habits or virtues distinctively emphasized by the encompassing vision which is theirs. In the Christian case, these are traditionally named faith, hope, and love, but other religions when internalized may involve a quite different set of virtues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>George Lindbeck, "Spiritual Formation and Theological Education," *Theological Education* 24, Supplement 1 (1988): 12.

The content of formation matters deeply. From the point of view of the welcoming community of Christ, therefore, inviting others into formation is not just about adding numbers. It is about faith, hope, and love. It takes place on behalf of the initiates and together with them for loving service in and for the world. Even from the point of view of the initiate, in the midst of the repentance and self-dedication that are taking place, one looks beyond the self toward a life of loving service.

Formation, then, is the movement within our growth into Christian identity that emphasizes participation with others over time for the sake of loving service. It's organic in a sense. It takes place within and among persons, within a story, within a special kind of time. Verbal explication is not its first language.

### *Education*

Education provides the deliberate, explicit, and sustained instruction, conversation, and reflection that equip people for ever more full and authentic participation in the colorful, rhythmic, and storied settings of formation and the places of loving service onto which they issue. Education nurtures and tends the language needed for participation. It dwells differently in time than formation does. But it does share with formation the purpose of faithful, loving, and hopeful presence for the life of the world. It steps forward to transmit faith explicitly and steps back to reflect on its meaning. Education would press beyond spiritual formation understood nontheologically, beyond the acquisition of a world view and virtues. To move from Lindbeck's nontheological account to a normative Christian understanding, we would need to engage in critical theological education. We would need to develop an argument about what articulations of "faith, hope, and love" would be normative in our context. And the first language of such education, it seems to me, would be the language of verbal explication.

Education teaches and tends the language of the church. Over time, all Christians need to know the stories and the words that give them the capacity for basic participation in the liturgical and moral life of the Christian community, gathered and dispersed. They pick up some of this in the course of life lived in the midst of these, but in almost every case, in every century of the church's life, deliberate teaching has also played a part. As Jaroslav Pelikan put it, "the church is always more than a school

... but the church cannot be less than a school.”<sup>4</sup> In most churches across many centuries, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the meaning of the sacraments and the Ten Commandments have been explicitly taught. Sometimes the church entrusts this teaching to parents, sometimes to called teachers, sometimes to schools, sometimes to pastors, sometimes to godparents or other Christian friends and mentors.

The explicit formulation and transmission of moral guidance for faithful living within specific contexts has also belonged to education. The Bible is the basic text for education in all of these matters, but in an especially important way it is also the source by which the church’s understanding of them is extended and deepened and corrected. All this happens in a community where these matters are valued in deed as well as in word. Over a lifetime, maturing Christians learn to bring the content and the wisdom of Christian education into a wider range of situations, to communicate it to others who do not know its core language, and to engage with critical perspectives on it.

What does this mean? For one thing, it means teaching newcomers how to participate in worship. When my Lutheran children and I were at First Presbyterian that Sunday eighteen days ago, they began to realize that no one else said “Amen” after prayers, and that in the Creed others said “Holy Ghost” rather than “Holy Spirit.” So they leaned over and asked, “Mom, when we get to the Lord’s Prayer, is it gonna be the same as how we say it?” I was pleased they had the insight to ask and that they were spared that big “trespass.” (Presbyterians say “debts.”) We shouldn’t underestimate how confusing and difficult such concerns are for people who come new into our congregations.

Teaching is a must not only with regard to participating in worship but also, and even more, with regard to participating in Christian living beyond the gathered assembly. This teaching needs to take seriously the fact that difficult questions will surely arise as Christians try to live faithfully; it is seldom completely clear what living beyond the Christian assembly will look like this week in this place. Thus teaching entails not only transmission but also reflection on the way of life into which we are called.

Reflection on the church’s language is one important aspect of this reflection. We need to notice the contradiction that people hear in words, we need to restate and reclaim meaning, we need to speak in fresh

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<sup>4</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

words—not new ones necessarily, but fresh ones, perhaps even words that are fresh precisely because they’ve been in cold storage for a long time.

Hymnody does this. Here is one way to distinguish between education and formation: the singing of hymns might be one of the most formative things that we do; the words form us deeply because our lungs are cooperating, the rhythms of our bodies are part of the rhythms of the music, we remember the meaning with the help of the beat and the rhyme. On the other hand, the writing and crafting of new hymns is part of what I would call education. This entails a self-reflective effort to bring language to bear in the situation of the people in ways that are fresh and communicative in new contexts.

My second point about education: Within an understanding of the whole church as the people of God, education strengthens the whole people in knowledge and wisdom in a particular way. In some quarters it’s assumed that the professionally educated and especially the ordained staff has all the knowledge that is needed. Insofar as their knowledge serves others and becomes a vehicle for others to grow in knowledge, their knowledge is very important and does belong to the whole body. But it is not sufficient. Edward Farley, a Presbyterian theologian, has argued that this will not do. He challenges the “clerical paradigm” that has demoted the importance of education for other Christians. Education, the ability to use the language and to reflect on it, provides an essential component within what he calls “the theological process inherent to the life of faith itself.” “Existence in the world before God,” writes Farley, “requires a wisdom that is not merely spontaneous but self consciously interpretive. ... [the character of] reality itself sets this requirement before every Christian person.”<sup>5</sup> If this is so, then theology is necessary to every believer, and developing an informed and reflective stance that opposes the idolatry and obscurantism to which human religiousness is prone is part of what it means to grow strong in Christian faith. Learning to think in this way, we must be deeply engaged with what Farley calls “reality” (including such things as technological change, the perilous state of our planet, the existential fact that we are all mortal and finite), not hiding from it but bringing it into the realm of faith. Farley argues that education of this kind enables the church and the individual to escape deceit and to interpret and act within ever-changing situations in Christian ways.

Theological education then is more than the transmission of subject matter. Instead, it makes believers theologians and, even better, more

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<sup>5</sup>Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 92.

thoughtful Christians—able to live more actively and truthfully because they can see through empty promises and discern sources of freedom, responsibility, and joy in the contemporary situation. Modernity, pluralism, and the fact that contemporary believers live in a world that is critical of thoughtful faith heighten the need for education on the part of the faithful.

Education in faith also addresses the need that exists in every age to be able to discern the worthy from the sham. This aspect of Christian education is exemplified by some of the scholars at this institute. Think, for example, of Maxwell Johnson's presentation on early Christian baptismal practices. This kind of critical historical retrieval is done on behalf of the whole church and contributes in important ways to the church's capacity to engage in faithful formation. Education also resists mass culture's erosion of complexity, resisting tendencies to oversimplify.

Third, education lives differently in time than formation does. While liturgy guides the faithful into time that is whole—with past, present, and future all woven together—education distinguishes among the three for some good reasons. Think, for instance, of texts about the Jews that belong to the liturgies of Holy Week. Heard now, after the Holocaust, these texts bear a different meaning than they did in the second century. One movement of faithful education would explore the history of early Christianity and later periods of Christian anti-Semitism in order to shed light on difficult texts and enduring estrangements. In this and other cases it can be helpful to separate the present and the past in order finally to put them back together in different ways. Far from distancing us from historic texts, such education can let us return to them in ways that are fresh and open.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, education supports Christian formation in mission and in loving service to the world by asking again and again whether the colorful, rhythmic patterns of liturgical formation are more than mere socialization. It does this by insisting that formative communities know and examine their connectedness to and their differences from other communities over time and across cultural boundaries. "Liturgical time loses its meaning when it becomes simply the complacent celebration of *status quo*, if the 'present' of the liturgy is merely the 'given' situation in which we find our

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<sup>6</sup>Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000).

human security,” wrote Thomas Merton, a great lover of liturgy.<sup>7</sup> As he knew, it is possible to enter a liturgy and to find only a “given situation” of “human security” operative there, a closed-in process that forms participants in customs but not in faith. Avoiding this dead end requires attention to issues that are typically the foci of scholarship and conversation situated beyond the walls of any given congregation, such as those shared at this institute.

Liturgy is formative, but it can be malformative when it loses its bearings and is not understood and enacted for the sake of the world. Alexander Schmemmann, the great Orthodox theologian, loved the liturgy but was always aware the liturgy can, as he put it, cease “to be a generator of power, and ... [can be] looked upon as a more or less antiquated decoration of religion. It ... [can be] used as a kind of ‘audio-visual’ aid in religious education but is neither the root of Christian life and action nor a ‘goal’ toward which they are oriented.”<sup>8</sup> Such liturgy loses its bearings and becomes mere socialization in human security.

### *The Mutual Dependence of Education and Formation*

My argument is that education is one of those movements within the life of the church that helps formation to be not just socialization but authentic growth in faith. It is education that keeps us reflecting on the aims of formation. In Lindbeck’s terms, it is education that guides us as we inquire into the normative meaning of the faith, hope, and love at the heart of Christian formation. Formation without education can become socialization and acculturation, inducting Christians into a way of life that we don’t bother to understand and more importantly don’t know how to assess. The self-reflection required by education is thus indispensable to Christian formation, as education outside of the liturgy but within the life of the church lends strength and authenticity to our worship and our living.

And what of education without formation? In a sense, why bother? Just as education contributes to formation, so formation gives to education its purpose and its home. Those who have been wrapped in the story of God’s grace, those who have put on Christ in baptism, those who know the cosmos as creation have encountered something that evokes wonder, in

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy*, ed. Gabe Huck (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 125.

<sup>8</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. and exp. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 53.

both senses. They wonder and thus long to know more; they wonder and are overcome by awe. Our formation is worthy when we are formed in the hunger to know God and our human brothers and sisters and all creation because we have been given grace to love them and because we trust that in knowing them more fully we will love them even more.

The vibrant combination of instruction and liturgy enacted in the catechumenate provides a rich model for education and formation in our time that can offer a fresh impetus for teaching and learning within the church not only when specific individuals are being prepared for baptism but also in the midst of every activity of shared life. As we develop this approach, what we will find, I suspect, is what our Roman Catholic friends already know: the most challenging aspect of Christian education and formation come after Easter, after initiation, in the ordinary time and ordinary places of life.