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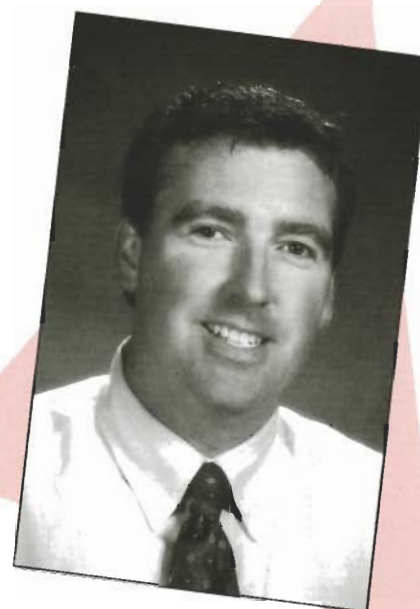
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How Does the Faith Muscle Grow?

By Ryan Darmody



The admissions director stops by my office and knocks on the door. He is giving another tour of our campus to perspective students and parents. As a high school campus minister and religious studies teacher, I am frequently asked to describe aspects of our school's spirituality to these guests. Parents are often amazed by the amount of service learning that is incorporated into all areas of our curriculum. They are impressed by the scope of our religious studies classes. The depth of our retreat programs, the extent of our community service outreach and charitable drives, and the vast participation of students in liturgies always draws approval and praise. Many who are not Catholic, though, wonder how their child will fit into the culture of the school.

I try to ease parental and student fears by pointing out that all people are people of faith. Everyone, whether practicing a religion or not, believes in something. Catholic students who have attended Catholic school every year will be just as challenged in their beliefs as students who have not been exposed to organized religion in their lives. Parents want their child to grow into a person with strong morals who will make good decisions. Religious education must challenge students to think critically about what they believe, which is the key to strengthening any belief.

Educational institutions of all sizes strive to challenge students intellectually with academic endeavors. Curricula are established with the intent of strengthening students in preparation for future work or continued study. Then what value do theological studies have compared with the "hard sci-

ences?" A study of physics may be able to explain how a plane flies and why it might have crashed. Business models and economic systems can teach how to make an airline profitable, examining margins, overhead costs and labor. Science, though, will not consider the question of why human life was lost and the reason for the suffering associated with the plane crash. And where will the business student's conscience be challenged to consider the ethical implications associated with laying off employees or cutting benefits to make a company more profitable? Although theology may not come to definitive answers in considering its questions, the process of searching for an answer, the "research" involved, challenges the student to grow spiritually.

Physically, one develops through athletic programs, intramurals, and sometimes simply rushing from class to class carrying weighted-down backpacks across campus. Faith, like the bicep, calf or deltoid, may be viewed analogously as a muscle, too. A muscle grows in mass and strength by being challenged. A weightlifter does not spend time lifting two-pound weights because that does not stimulate growth. There is no challenge. Athletes must push their muscular and cardiovascular systems to great extremes to prepare their bodies to react with strength and agility in competition and times of great stress. A muscle that goes completely unused, as in the case of a bed-ridden patient, will atrophy. Then, when the individual needs the muscle to walk, it will not be ready to respond.

Faith, too, only develops when challenged. Students who are taught to

question the beliefs put forward around them will not follow a dangerous path of blind faith. Their "faith muscle" will grow through the strenuous workout of theological consideration, research and contemplation. In their own times of crisis, faith will not fail them because it has been challenged and strengthened through study.

The students we teach today will become our society's doctors and engineers, parents and civic leaders, community organizers and educators. Many schools will prepare students well for comprehensive examines, career challenges, and leadership roles. Graduates will move on with competencies in their specific field of study as well as skills that translate into all types of work. Religious education, though, prepares students for the part of life that is at the heart of being human. Four years after those tour guests stop by my office, I feel confident they understand the value of the religious education they chose. ■

Ryan Darmody is a ten year veteran junior high and high school teacher. He currently teaches ethics/morality and scripture at Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory. He is also pursuing his MA in theology at the University of San Francisco and was married this August.