



The author, Brother David Deradoorian, F.S.C., conducts class, ready at any moment to wrestle with questions from his students about faith or religious life.

Here's how one teacher encourages conversations about faith and responds to questions about religious life.

Fielding myths and questions about consecrated life

IN PREPARATION FOR MY SECOND YEAR of teaching, I hung up a metal street sign in my classroom. “God at Work,” it read. At the time I gave it little thought.

I have since come to appreciate this sign in a profound way. I sometimes stare at it in the middle of a lesson or at the end of a long day. It is an important reminder. While my teacher training program taught me how to teach, and my Basic Skills Test scores proved I was competent to teach, my high school religion classes have slowly revealed to me the hearts of young people. This is where God has been at work, both in my own heart and the hearts of my students. In my high school religion classes, I have learned a great deal about attitude and approach in dealing with my students’ struggle for meaning and questions about faith. I’ve also learned how to respond to the myths and curiosities they hold about religious life. First, a few reflections on the opportunities that present themselves in a religion classroom and what I’ve learned about engaging with young people.

BY BROTHER DAVID DERADOORIAN, F.S.C.



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Although I trained at a state university as a Spanish teacher prior to entering religious life, I have spent my life as brother teaching high school religion. Teaching religion has helped me realize how much I am called to grow; it is in this engagement with faith that I realize how much I need to open myself up to unfolding mys-

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tery. Thankfully young people have a way of fostering humility and short-circuiting our need to be right and in control. They invite us out of ourselves. They beg us to be honest, authentic versions of ourselves. "A credible church is one which is not afraid to allow itself be seen as vulnerable," wrote the young people who gave input to the 2018 youth synod in their final document.

I am often inspired by the words of Saint Paul: "I handed on to you what I first received" (1 Cor. 11:23). My teaching of religion and the conversations about faith I have with young people are an extension of my own personal and communal prayer and faith experiences. The history and charism of my institute (Brothers of the Christian Schools) has always reflected a preference for teaching religion. In fact Pope Pius X officially named us "Apostles of the Catechism." What a privilege it is to embrace this daily challenge!

Saint John Baptist de La Salle recognized the holiness of the classroom, and many teachers will attest that the classroom is indeed a sacred space. The young people who drafted the pre-synod document made it clear that parishes are sometimes no longer places of connection. Faith exploration is happening increasingly with educators and friends.

In a unique way a religion classroom can be an honest, safe space for teenagers to encounter God. It is here, among other settings, that meaningful and necessary dialogue takes place. Young people grappling with their own self-worth, avowed atheists, seekers, young men and women of different faith traditions—all are able to challenge and support each other. John Baptist de La Salle encourages educators to do our part to build up the Kingdom of God in our students (Meditation 67.1).

Letting them lead

During my years at three distinct high school assignments, I have humbly learned that I could spend literally hours in lesson preparation. I could think of all the higher-level questions that students need for engagement. I could consider all possible weaknesses in a lesson's flow. When least expected, and when the lesson seems (in my mind) to be going well, a hand in the back will rise. I get excited, because I think that this seemingly disinterested student is about to ask about the chapter vocabulary, opine on the in-class reading, or answer my lesson's essential question for the day.

"Brother, as you get older, how has your faith in God changed?"

Close the textbook. Check the clock. Rustle papers. Continue with the curriculum tomorrow. Is today's lesson over? Or is it just starting? The textbook comprehension questions we were working on require little or no vulnerability—can't we just stick with those?

The digression can take many forms, and it is to be expected at any time: an opinion about a church teaching, an insight, a spontaneous debate, an indirect request for affirmation, a public confession, an exposé of a family quarrel, or an honest and sincere wrestling with a personal issue or current event. As is true for any of us, but especially for adolescents, we want to be listened to and validated. A student recently shared with me the following insight about our class: "One thing I'm learning in this religion class is that God gives everlasting love. I don't even know how long I've been needing to hear those four words." Young people today want to know that their struggles, insecurities, and doubts are not unfounded or unique. They want to know that when life has been overwhelming, they can find their way towards Home and, in the process, find God running toward them on an often lonely, dusty road. They want companions on their journey of faith—and the reassurance that the One who is the Way can become their way also.

Every profession has a hazard; perhaps this is ours: if we are to be credible and authentic teachers, we will have to speak honestly and from the heart. We become, bidden or not, public pray-ers. We become public signs of God's presence in our world today. And we know that adolescents and young adults can easily detect frauds.

Whether they would overtly divulge it or not, teenagers and young adults are curious and interested in the lifestyle that the brothers and sisters at my school lead. The counter-cultural dimension of sacrifice and the service of vowed women and men speaks to them. This

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counter-cultural fixation can lead to long-term service commitments, mission trips, flip-phone challenges (a dare to get by without a smart phone), and other somewhat radical choices. Young people want to be challenged, stand for something, and belong to something.

Now, if I were to structure a lesson on "consecrated life in the 21st century church," there would be minimal interest. But when that topic emerges from my students' own hearts, and when the timing seems right for them, the conversation is always rich, fruitful, and meaningful. I'm basically saying the same thing I would say if I were to construct a lesson, but I'm allowing them to take the lead. This changes the dynamics of the conversation.

Bold, honest, authentic

The young people who gathered to give input to the 2018 youth synod called for bold conversations in their final document: "The young have many questions about the faith, but desire answers which are not watered-down, or which utilize pre-fabricated formulations." One brother with whom I was in formation would remind me that young people do not want "corporate tagline" responses to their questions. They want authenticity.

Authenticity needs to shape our answers when they ask basic questions or state misconceptions about our lives. What are those questions and myths? Following are questions students repeatedly ask and how I try to authentically respond. These conversations and honest questions would not be possible without first fostering among the students in my class a sense of welcome and openness. I am conscious of continually reminding them that I, too, am journeying in faith.

The final document from the pre-synod meeting of young adults poses a striking question in its introduction: "How [can] we as the church best accompany ... young people towards a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world?" This requires patience, faithfulness, and joy.

YOU ALWAYS KNEW YOU WANTED TO BE A BROTHER
Well, no. Life unfolds itself slowly to us, and for this, we should be grateful. I think it is crucial that young people understand the need for continual commitment and discernment. Discovering God's call is not something we do for a season; it is a life-long mindset. I am struck by the words of a brother who once shared with his own classroom: God doesn't necessarily call us to a specific



Religious could invite people into their homes to witness their common life, a pursuit that requires plenty of cooperation and effort. Here the author, Brother David Deradoorian, F.S.C., cleans up after a meal with Brother Joseph Juliano, F.S.C.

profession, avocation, or vocation. God calls us to a life of generosity. God calls us to give tirelessly of ourselves. It is our job to determine which lifestyle will permit us to be most generous to our neighbor, to have mercy on our neighbor. We are then called to go and do likewise (Luke 10:37).

YOU MUST HAVE NO FAITH STRUGGLES. Somehow it is believed that, the moment I began wearing a black shirt and collar for a living, my personal faith struggles dissipated. I am grateful that this has not been the case! It is important that we are honest with young people—the more we share our struggles and our wrestling with faith, the more they can see us as credible human beings, making our way. I have often appreciated Flannery O'Connor's insight, from *Habit of Being*, a collection of her letters: "When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty."

SO YOU CAN'T REALLY BE YOURSELF ANYMORE. To many of my students, our lifestyle seems awfully constricting. I always find this question stems from much larger questions about our vows, our common life, and

our commitment to Gospel values. It also is rooted in an adolescent's opinion of what is fun. Our evangelical counsels do not restrict drinking or tattoos. We do not have a vow against fun. I am encouraged to travel to weddings, see my family, and have a healthy social life.

How can we allow young people to view our vowed commitments as actually liberating? My wardrobe generally baffles a young person, especially one caught up in the endless, exhausting pursuit of name brand belts, shoes, backpacks. They know I own several black robes and black shirts without logos. And it is equally as baffling when, chaperoning a dance, I am dressed like an everyday human being.

Somehow, as soon as you've established with a teenager that you do not own an Xbox (or any gaming system for that matter), our lifestyle is immediately considered boring. What do you do with your free time if you don't have video games or sleep for 12 hours a day? How can we foster the notion that, as a brother, I am called to fully be myself? I am called to bring who I am, with my strengths and limitations, as a gift to my community. I have read and re-read this statement from the pre-synod document: "An especially important quality in a mentor is acknowledgement of their humanity—that they are human beings who make mistakes: not perfect people but forgiven sinners."

YOUR LIFE MUST BE VERY LONELY. Life, when lived out of balance, can be a lonely road. Not having the companionship and fulfillment of a spouse, we must work at creating spaces and avenues for love. It can be mind-blowing for students when I share that some of my married friends find themselves lonely on a Friday or Saturday evening, too, with them watching TV while a spouse is in another room scrolling through social media feeds. Regardless of our lifestyle, how do we seek to be present to the other in our midst? In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen suggests that the first real movement of the spiritual life is from loneliness to solitude.

RELIGIOUS SHOULD BE SITTING ON THE ALTAR, NOT IN THE PEW. It's difficult for most Catholics (and even more difficult for non-Catholics) to understand the concept of a man who has given his life to the church but is not a priest. I believe it is important that young people understand, as Saint Paul reminds us, that there are a variety of gifts, but the same spirit; a variety of service, but the same Lord (1 Cor. 12). I have chosen a lay lifestyle, and tell them that by doing so, I actually have more in common with them than they realize. Our baptism has called us to life as apostles; our religious consecration simply augments that. Sharing why religious profession is not its own sacrament helps to clarify this. My ministerial duties involve finding holiness in the ordinary. While I am not able to administer the sacraments, I have found that I am able to be present for many sacramental moments: talking a young person through their parent's divorce, listening to someone's self doubts, lending an ear to a co-worker speaking of her husband's illness. God comes to us in these experiences as clearly as in the established sacraments.

DOES EVERYONE IN YOUR HOUSE GET ALONG? You cannot choose your family but you can choose your friends! We are assigned to a community that puts itself at the service of a ministry. Living together takes work, and living together in an authentic freedom takes even more work. It is vital that people are allowed into our communities and invited to share in our prayers and common life. Perhaps they will see that, indeed, men of different ethnicities, backgrounds, educational levels, political preferences, and preferences for dining room paint colors can get along. In fact living as a community is one of the ways we are called to grow, change, and humble ourselves. Our shared life must be built on cooperation, not competition. In some small way, I believe that our stone house with the cross above the side

door is a sign of the Kingdom of God, the world as God would have it. Jesus prays in his farewell discourse in John 17:21 that all may be one as he and the Father are one. Let it be so.

YOU'VE HAD TO MAKE A TREMENDOUS SACRIFICE. Egocentrism can thrive throughout high school and into college. To live a life focused on other people (especially people we don't even know) seems strange. In the eyes of many teenagers and young adults, if something doesn't directly help them, why should they be interested in it? It is good for them to be exposed to a wide range of people, living a variety of lifestyles, who have chosen to live heroic, sacrificial lives. These might range from a parent working multiple jobs to pay tuition, a religious ministering to the marginalized and remaining faithful to his or her vowed life, a couple remaining together after an accident, a parent caring for a son or daughter with an addiction. These stories begin to open young people's eyes to the prodigal love of God, which manifests itself in our prodigal love for each other, where a score isn't kept or a tally maintained. It is OK that life demands sacrifices; it's how egocentrism is slowly shaved away. The sacrifice of my vows is just one of many types of sacrifices that holy men and women—single, married, ordained, consecrated—make each day.



These myths and responses represent one way to begin the conversations called for during the 2018 youth synod. Here again are the words of young people who gathered prior to the synod to give input. In their final document, they wrote: "We have found that young people want authentic witnesses—men and women who vibrantly express their faith and relationship with Jesus while encouraging others to approach, meet, and fall in love with Jesus themselves." Archbishop Oscar Romero urged his radio address listeners in 1977 to never tire of preaching love. His plea continues for each of us today.

Each evening, during prayer, I reflect on the blessing of the day. To paraphrase Father Henri Nouwen, journeying with teenagers gives me an opportunity to witness to young people the glimpses of God I've been able to catch.

"God at work." Not that I even needed a reminder. ■

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