

My students would look quizzically at me if I asked them to describe the paschal mystery. Yet, without even using the expression, they live the experience every day. Teenagers are not always intentional with the words and rituals of the Christian story. Sometimes they discard religious language for awhile in their search for an independent self. Nevertheless, they remain aware of the significance of their life experiences, feeling them deeply as a movement of transformation, from darkness to light, from death to new life.

Often my work in high school chaplaincy is to elicit students' attentiveness to such inner movements. I might easily name their transformative encounters as moments of grace, embodiments of the paschal mystery at work in us. However, it is not always helpful to use the language of Christian faith if there is no experiential awareness to go with it.

So, my ministry with adolescents begins with acceptance, trust, having fun, and calling forth talents for common tasks. These qualities of relating are very liberating for young people, freeing them to discover who they are, to become healing and creative in their living. In their search for personal identity teenagers also want to discover themselves as beings in community, concerned for the world around them. Our community building activities often involve outreach in charity and justice, for persons in need, for the environment. Sometimes this work is done without proclaiming explicitly the God who calls nations to justice, or Christ who gave the commandment to love, or the Spirit who brings creation to birth.

I am not reluctant to sow seeds of faith with the words of scripture and liturgy, but I do know the seed needs to land on fertile ground. The work of trust building and affirmation, of truth seeking and reconciliation, creativity, and play -- these are the sacred moments, however named, that awaken young people to the place within where God's Spirit moves and gives growth.

Now, Catholic high school students are not strangers to the Christian tradition. During a less self conscious period of their lives, grade school teachers easily immersed them in its rituals and prayers. However, adolescence is a time for learning to sail in new waters. As they embark on an intense journey of identity formation, teenagers might still use the religious language of their tradition, but they will look for authenticity in the message and the messenger. Young people are perceptive, if not prudent. If religious figures, such as chaplains and teachers, use faith language in a superficial or controlling manner, teenagers will dismiss us and the Christian story we proclaim. If, however, the one who speaks the language of faith also lives the language of relationships and trust, if he or she gives affirmation to the doubting teenager, and delights in the quirks and creativity of adolescence, then young people can find in the messenger's words a mirror that reveals to them their most authentic Self, the Christ within.

Looking for the paschal mystery in the real experiences of my students affects the way we prepare and celebrate liturgy. At our year end eucharist, for example, I invited six graduating students to speak after the president's homily. A few days prior I gave them a copy of the first reading to guide their preparation: "put on kindness, humility, patience...over all these put on love" (Colossians 3:12-17). When I introduced the grads at the homily I spoke of how the vice principals and teachers had been telling them for five years to put on the uniform properly and tuck in their shirts. But on this day St. Paul was telling us to clothe ourselves with a different kind of uniform, that of kindness, humility, and patience; and over it all to put on love. Imagine, I suggested, what our school would be like if we all wore such clothing. I continued to explain that our grads would be remembering some of the significant experiences and people of their years at 'Bennies,' times when they learned to "put on" something new that they would cherish and take with them. Also, I said, when we put on new clothes, we have to leave the old ones behind, and the seniors would share what they were ready to let go of as they moved on.

Here are some of the reflections our students put on paper as they mused on my questions and the Colossians reading, preparing to leave the walls of St. Benedict's high school.

*Since grade nine I've changed a lot. I have become my own person. Some of the things I want to take with me are courage, the courage to know I can accomplish anything even when my goals seem far away. I have sensitivity that helps me forgive and relate to people. I have maturity, love. I have power. Power over myself and my feelings. I have the power to be happy, to achieve my dreams, and support myself through life.*

*I want to let go of the attitude of trying to fit in all of the time, and just try to be my own person.*

*I'll be taking with me a sense of belonging.*

*I'll be letting go of my sense of low self-worth and bad attitudes that I came here with.*

*I want to let go of my fears and worries.*

*I have given myself honesty. I want to take that with me throughout the rest of my life. If you are honest within yourself, you can be honest with others.*

*I want to pass on to others my willingness to fight for the rights of those less fortunate, to appreciate the differences within our society and to accept them. I am glad that I am saying goodbye to my judgmental and gossipy ways.*

*I remember walking the halls by myself, carrying my lunch bag with tears in my eyes. I was so scared I felt like I had no one. But then I met a new group of friends who helped me to care about myself. I learned so much. It's been a long, difficult journey, but I'm leaving a better and more loving person.*

These students might be unfamiliar with the text of Christian Initiation: "you have become a new creation. . . receive this baptismal garment," yet they have experienced something of what it means to put on Christ. Their articulation of the paschal mystery might be vague, yet they have known the gift of transformation through suffering to new life.

When young people hear their own lives remembered in the same breath as the Christ story that we proclaim in the prayers and actions of liturgy, they might look more readily to the Christian community for trustworthy companions on their journey. And when we celebrate faith as life, and recognize in life's relationships and experiences our faith, then the heart of a young man or woman might see its own reflection in the words: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).