

One summer when I was in the seminary I visited Eliga, my best friend from graduate school. In our conversation I mentioned my Dean of Formation at the Seminary, Fr. Hickey. Eliga was taken aback by the title “Dean of Formation.” That title sounded kind of creepy to him. “Formation” sounded like something a cult or a communist re-education camp would do. I realized then that the concept of formation needs explaining in today’s world. At a seminary, men are not only educated in the academic studies they will need – theology, canon law, etc. To be a priest is not simply to master a body of information. It also means taking on a new identity. One must be formed into that identity through prayer, spiritual direction, etc.

But it’s not only priests. All Catholics must undergo formation if their faith is to transform them. I mention that because today I want to preach on a change in the Holy Family Faith Formation program. Catholic children not only need to learn facts about the faith, they also need to be formed in it. By that I mean children must learn how to BE a

Catholic – that means shaping, not only their minds, but also their imaginations, hopes, and dreams with the practices, prayers, customs, stories of Jesus and His Church. Ultimately, what this means is that we must grow into imitating Jesus – to act and live as He did.

Think about Peter in our gospel. He sees Jesus walking on water. He wants to do the same. Jesus encourages him. We think it's impossible. Jesus doesn't. He calls Peter to follow Him. "Come," He says. Jesus is saying that to each of us. Every Catholic must take on this identity. The Catholic faith is a way of life a person must step into and live out if the faith is to stick and bear fruit in today's world.

I mentioned the communist re-education camps earlier. Well, trying to be a Catholic is difficult in today's society, in part, because the secular society does its own formation on us. And, as in the communist systems, this social formation is largely non-, if not anti-Catholic. I don't mean 21<sup>st</sup> century America is the same as the old Soviet Union, but its culture often works against what Jesus wants to teach us.

In years past, the larger culture helped in the formation of Catholics because the culture and the Church agreed in many areas of morality and philosophy. That's not so true anymore. Furthermore, much of the formation in the old days was done by one's parents, or Irish or Italian grandmother. They would tell you what that holiday celebrates, or why, when, and how we cross ourselves, or what Lent is all about. But these days a child's parents and even grandparents often have not themselves received much formation in the faith.

That brings me back to our Faith Formation program at Holy Family. I have decided that what we've been doing – treating the faith like an academic subject to be learned -- doesn't work. It doesn't form Catholics. I hasten to add that this isn't the fault of the faith formation teachers. They're heroes of the parish. They've devoted their Monday evenings to trying to teach our children about the faith. But it's been hard. We haven't offered them any formation as teachers. We just sort of threw them into classrooms of ten to twenty kids, tired from a day at

school, now are back at their desks, being talked to again. Some information gets imparted, but not much formation happens. The kids don't come out with the eyes, minds, and imaginations of Catholics. We can't just go on doing what doesn't work.

Therefore, I've decided that all our pre-school through fifth grade Faith Formation will now be offered through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd model. This is a Montessori based Catholic formation program that offers children a different way to be formed in the faith. CGS starts with the assumption that God and a child are already in a relationship. We adults are meant to nurture that bond. CGS presents themes from the Bible and the Mass to let kids ponder and play out the mysteries of our faith and deepen their friendship with God. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd lets the kids themselves enact hands-on experiences that teach about what the faith means.

This new model will mean that the children will be at Faith Formation for two hours rather than one. This method requires time.

It's a quiet and unrushed experience. And each catechist receives at least 90 hours of formation in how to facilitate the set encounters a child passes through.

There are three levels organized by age, not grade: years 3 – 6, 6 – 9, 9 - 12. Each family can select one from four possible days to bring their kids to CGS, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday afternoons from 4:00 – 6:00, and from 2:30 – 4:30 on Sunday. Pre-schoolers also have the option of coming in the morning 9:30 – 11:30, instead of afternoon. For many years Faith Formation at HFK has been on Monday nights at 6:30, so I realize this will require families to reorganize their schedules. It might mean car-pooling with classmates. I know there will be difficulties at first. But Jesus calls us to step out of the boat to do challenging things – driven and buoyed by our faith in Him.

I would not have made this change if I didn't think that Catechesis of the Good Shepherd offers our children their best chance of being formed into life-long Catholics – and saints. And that is our

responsibility to the children entrusted to us by God. Eliga, and perhaps you, may think the idea of formation is weird, but it's not a question of whether we're in formation. We're all being formed by some culture of ideas, whether we recognize it or not. It's a matter of whether we will be formed more by the world, or by Jesus.