

**Confirmation in Faith Formation Students Means Graduation from Church
What and Why it is Happening and What Can be done to Keep Students Engaged**

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DESCRIPTIVE TASK

Every year there is a good number of students preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation. However, they are absent from weekend Masses, and they rarely are seen approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Their absence from church seems to be more notorious after they receive Confirmation. Hence, the research question: what can the people of God at the Church of Saint Mary in Willmar, Minnesota do to help young people remain active in the sacramental and parish life of the Church before, during and after their preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation? This document looks at the connection between active Catholics and large numbers of our youth population who do not seem to lead a sacramental life. It explains why the youth are disaffiliating and what should be happening and finally identifies actions on the part of engaged members of the church to keep our young people benefiting from the Sacraments of the Church.

The fact of young people leaving the church has many concerned. However many see at the young leaving but not at the ones staying in the Church. The authors of *Going, Going Gone* try to urge pastoral ministers to “become more aware of and see all the moments in young persons’ lives that cause faith and belief struggles, questioning and doubt to emerge.” The study alerts these moments are critical opportunities to engage and build connection while failure to do that “contributes to the accumulation of unresolved incongruities and furthers young people along the path of disaffiliation.”¹ Pope Francis seems to be aware of this situation thus his constant call to accompany young people on their spiritual journey and to appreciate their

¹ McCarty, Robert & Vitek, John, *Going, Going, Gone* (Winona: St. Mary’s Press, 2017), 34.

criticism.² The authors also bring to our attention the need to “assist parents in understanding the significant impact they have on their child’s sense of connectedness to the Church;” and to prioritize families on the margins who are drifting, dissenting, or injured.³ Today is harder than before to raise children in the faith.⁴

On a more general subject, the authors of the 2020 State of Religion & Young People write,

young people are experiencing record loneliness. They have low levels of trust in most traditional institutions, and they are likely not responding to the efforts these institutions are making to connect with them. But they are—amid all these realities—seeking meaning, navigating questions of identity, and pursuing community. And they need trusted adults to listen to, care for, and guide them.⁵

In the minutes of the December 14, 2021’s meeting of the Department Heads of the Catholic Area Faith Community of Jesus Our Living Water, to which the Church of Saint Mary belongs reads, “We currently have a 95% drop-out rate [of youth involvement.]” This data aligns with findings from the Pew Research Center: In the U.S. “teens are less likely than their parents to pray daily, to believe in God with absolute certainty and to consider religion “very important” in their lives.⁶ In similar research, the National Study of Youth and Religion found that in 2002, 40% of youth were attending weekly Mass while in 2013 only 16% of them (by then emerging adults) continued with weekly participation at Mass.⁷ This reality is evident to all who are at

² Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, May 25, 2019. Found at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html, 39.

³ McCarty, Robert & Vitek, John, *Going, Going, Gone*, 35.

⁴ Shea, James P., University of Mary, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission* (Bismark: University of Mary Press, 2020), 27.

⁵ Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority* (Winona: Springtide Research Institute, 2021), 15.

⁶ Diamant, Jeff and Sciupac, Elizabeth. “10 Key findings about the religious lives of U.S. teens and their parents.” September 10, 2020. Pew Research Center. Available at: <https://pewrsr.ch/2RfpWsb>.

⁷ Denton, Melinda Lundquist, Richard W Flory, and National Study of Youth & Religion (U.S.). 2020. *Back Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 57-91.

Mass any given Sunday (or Saturday night) at the Church of Saint Mary. Most of our youth are absent from Sunday Mass and they are rarely seen in the line for Confession.

The author of this paper is an employee of the Church of Saint Mary. She works as Director of Hispanic Ministry, Spanish RCIA and Spanish Adult Faith Formation. On that day of December 14, 2021, along with the other Department Heads, left the meeting with the task to think and pray about the youth involvement in Mass. This research paper is her response to that request.

Furthermore, this situation is of particular concern for the author because, aside of working as a lay minister preparing people for their sacraments, she has at home five children, and it is her ultimate desire to see them happy in this earth and in eternity. She sees the difference living a sacramental life has on people, including her. She compares the lives of people with a sacramental life with those that do not lead sacramental lives; people active at church lead more fulfilling, happy and healthy lives.⁸

Having such a huge youth dropout rate from Mass and their absence from parish events and activities could mean our young people are not living a sacramental life. For an alarming number of young people, their behavior after Confirmation is totally opposed to what the Church affirms the Sacrament of Confirmation does on people: “For ‘by the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence, they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and

⁸ Marshall Joey, “Are religious people happier, healthier? Our new global study explores this question.” *Pew Research Center*, January 31, 2019.
<https://pewrsr.ch/2MEWOYx>

defend the faith by word and deed.' (CCC #1285).” Sadly, we do not see recently Confirmed young people actively spreading and defending the faith by word and deed.

For the youth of the Church of Saint Mary in Willmar, Minnesota their Confirmation seems to mean graduation from sacramental life. What can be done to help St. Mary’s young people lead a sacramental life before, during and after their preparation for Confirmation?

INTERPRETATIVE TASK

To find out a response to the previous question, I will draw on the wisdom outside of theology. This section attempts to understand what dynamics beyond faith formation classes are affecting our youth in becoming disengaged Catholics.

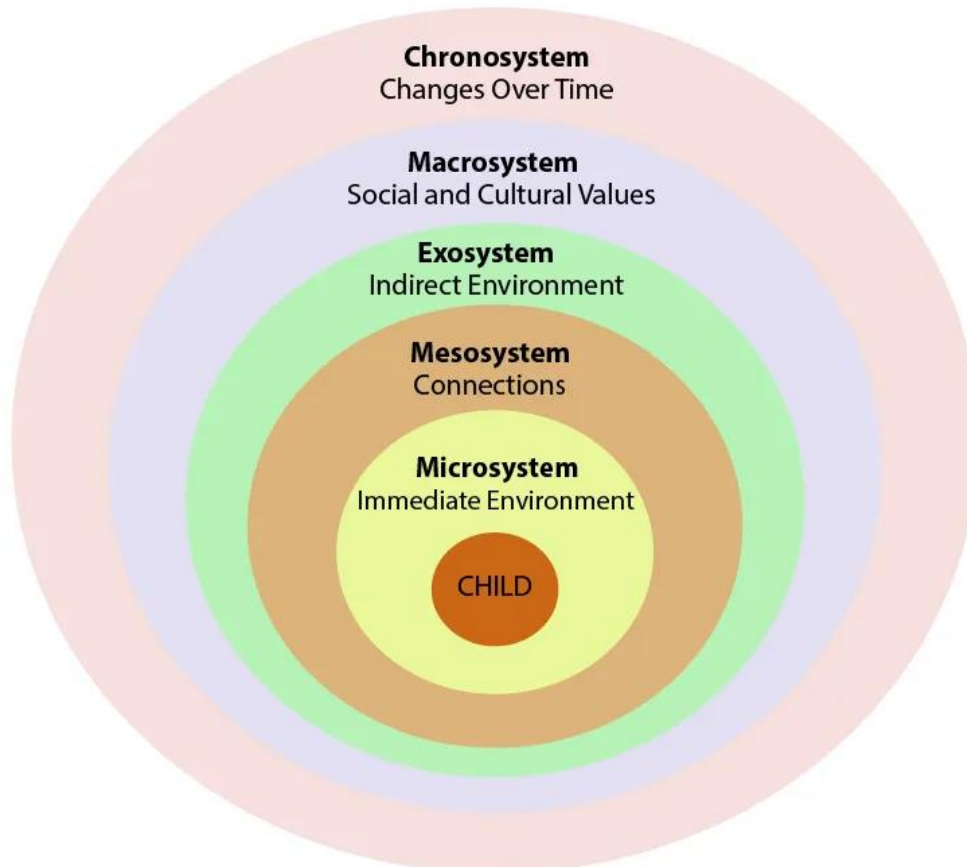
The theory chosen for this paper is the Bioecological Systems Theory created by Urie Bronfenbrenner a Russian-American professor of Cornell who in 1979 published it. This theory continues to influence the education system in the United States. The Bioecological Systems Theory explains the impact the environment, understood, as concentric systems around the child, will have on every child's development producing changes on their behavior observable even years after the occurrence of events.

Bronfenbrenner conceived the ecological environment "as a set of nested structures, each inside the next."⁹ In the innermost level, Bronfenbrenner places the child, is the microsystem. The home, school classroom, the church, and neighborhood are all parts of the microsystem. The next level looks to the relationships between the immediate surroundings of the child just mentioned. The interaction between the child's home, school classroom, church and neighborhood are the mesosystem. At the third level of the ecological environment are the events that affect the child from a distance without even the child being present, like parents working conditions, Mass media, child's school, community services, etc. It is the exosystem. The outermost level is the macrosystem; this last layer includes society values, trending ideologies,

⁹ Bronfenbrenner, Urie, and BRONFENBRENNER, Urie. *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3. Accessed October 17, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

laws, etc. Time is also included in this theory as the chronosystem. The figure below describe these structures.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



(C) The Psychology Notes Headquarters <https://www.PsychologyNotesHQ.com>

Below is a fictional story of a child whose life events and life style are common to students in our faith formation program. For each layer of the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System, I will describe events, structures, relationships, factors and other situations in the life of this fictional character that fit in that level. Seeing details of the life of children through the lenses of this theory offers two helpful views. First, to see more clearly the effects the environment has on a student's faith life. Second, it is easier to see how decisive parents are for the faith of their own children.

Microsystem. The child is a female member of a blended family that goes to Mass few times a year. She lives with her mother and stepfather but spends two weekends a month with her biological father. Her mom and her stepdad are not sacramentally married therefore they do not receive Communion nor approach the sacrament of Reconciliation. Her biological father is not interested in Church even though he is catholic. The student has an older stepsister and a younger half-brother, both are not baptized. The family prays several times a week mostly at supptime and before going to bed, never more than five minutes. The child goes to a public school where she has classmates of different Christian denominations, Muslims, and non-believers as well. Her science curriculum helps her to understand the biological and physical aspects of the world; there is no room for faith or the spiritual. In her Social Studies classes, she has learnt that there are many religions in the world, all to be respected equally. The child enjoys attending weekly faith formation at St. Mary's where she was baptized and received First Reconciliation and First Communion, but after those first events, she has not had the opportunity to approach the sacraments frequently. She has learnt that she must love God with all her heart but does not understand how to do that.

Mesosystem. This student has parents who help her with homework, read with her and to her when she was little, their teachers are good at communicating with her parents and her parents do not miss school conferences. They are proud of her studies and support her in extracurricular activities like sports; her mother volunteers to give rides for practice and games to teammates, some of which are Muslims.

Exosystem. The mother of this student works in sales, the father works in administrative support. This student uses snapchat, TikTok, videogames, watches movies in Disney+ and some *animes* and other videos in YouTube. Her parents use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and

Pinterest where they find great ideas for their home decorating and improvements projects. This student spends her weekend visiting family, friends and in sports related events.

Macrosystem. The City of Willmar blends diverse cultures and faiths. There are Hispanic of different countries, native Americans, Somalian and of other African ancestries. The first immigrants were mostly Lutheran while most recent immigrants are primarily of Muslim faith; there are nearly 100 faith congregations in our area. The city offers weekly cultural events and a variety of opportunities to engage and learn about people of different backgrounds. Willmar makes great efforts to educate, integrate and engage its residents to overcome health, cultural, economic, and social barriers.¹⁰ Sometimes in the radio, while in the school bus, the student listen to ads of non- Catholic Christian churches sharing segments of the Gospel or inviting to their services, but never has heard anything about or from her church, the Church of Saint Mary.

Chronosystem. The student lived with both biological parents just for a couple of years, then they separated, and she lived with her single mother and an older brother for four years until the mother married her husband. The student was six when she had to adapt to live with the new members of her immediate family: a stepdad, a stepsister and then a younger half-brother. Since first grade, this student has a phone constantly on her hands; her father gave one to her when her mother married her stepfather and all the family moved to live at her stepfather house. The student attended Kennedy Elementary for kindergarten and first grade; for second grade, she transferred to Lakeland Elementary.

The various levels of the Bronfenbrenner's systems theory demonstrate the diversity of interconnected influences on the faith development of a child. Awareness of the circumstances

¹⁰ City of Willmar Economic Development Commission, accessed December 16, 2022, <https://kandiyohi.com/living/diversity/>

that children are in, can inform, and give us a clearer picture, of the way our faith formation students, and families, live their faith. The student in the story is not receiving from her parents the example of living a sacramental life, not even a solid, constant, and deep, prayer life. The school does not promote the sacramental life, the Catholic faith nor Christian values. Current education models at public schools are anthropocentric. Her friends and extended family do not center their lives around the sacraments either. St. Mary's has not offered her frequent opportunities to go to Reconciliation or the Eucharist while at Faith Formation. The movies, TV or social media series, and YouTube videos that the student watches do not highlight or promote the sacraments. There are not citywide events inviting to the Eucharist or to Penance Services, or at least to Sunday Mass or other religious events.

The Church considers the family the original cell of social life and the community in which the child begin to honor God¹¹, any pastoral solution to our problem has to involve the family of each of the students in our faith formation programs.

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2207.

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

This section of the paper interprets theologically the fact that after Confirmation most students leave the Church. Exegesis of Matthew 22:36-39, the greatest commandment of love of God, and consideration of the theological concept of conversion two thoughts for a possible pastoral response: review of our Faith Formation programs and focus on individual and communal transformation.

EXEGESIS

The exegetical work begins with the analysis of three bible translations of the passage.

1. From the New American Bible: *“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

In reference to this passage, the Bishops of the United States note, “for all devout Jews all the commandments were to be kept with equal care.” After noting Matthew omitted the first part of Mark’s fuller quotation, they highlight, “The love of God must engage the total person (heart, soul, and mind)”. As a final point, the Bishops add, “Jesus goes beyond the extent of the question put to him and joins to the greatest and the first commandment a second, that of love of neighbor.” For the bishops this may not have been new, “this combination of the two commandments may already have been made in Judaism.”¹²

¹² USCCB, The New American Bible, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/matthew/22>

2. From the New Revised Standard Version: “*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

The editors of the NRSV, *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, note, “Jesus quotes the first commandment from Moses on Deut. 6:5. The *heart* is the center of a person’s willing, choosing, doing. Jesus quotes Lev 19:18. Leviticus 19 offers an extensive vision of a world marked by just human relations and practical care.”

3. From The Jerusalem Bible online: “*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself.*”

The Jerusalem Bible offers no notes.

The Collegeville Commentary on this passage:

Jesus summarizes the whole of the Law in two commandments (see also 7:12). The first, the Shema (Deut 6:4-9), was recited twice a day by Jews. It enjoins love of God with one’s whole heart, soul, and strength. The heart (*kardia*), was considered the seat of all emotions, the soul (*psychē*), the center of vitality and consciousness, and strength (*ischys*) denotes power or might. The second command, love of neighbor, is from the Holiness Code (Lev 19:18), which asserts that love of God is manifest in love toward the neighbor. The modern Western notion of the necessity of self-love would have been a foreign concept to people of the biblical world. They did not understand themselves in individualistic terms, but rather as enmeshed in a particular family, clan, and religious group. Dependent on others for their sense of self-identity, love of self and love of others are inseparable¹³.

In the same line, the commentary to *The Didache Bible*, based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church offers this paragraph: “Once again [Jesus] stressed the importance

¹³ Durken, Daniel. *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: One Volume Hardcover Edition* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), Matthew. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/csbsju/detail.action?docID=5314734>Created from csbsju on 2022-11-14 17:44:15.

of external acts, reflecting observance of the Law is accompanied and animated by the proper disposition of the heart -love of God and love of neighbor. The commandments find their true meaning in light of the two Great Commandments of love.¹⁴”

On their commentary Ulrich Luz argues that the second commandment added by Jesus on his response to the questioner is not firmly embedded in the text due to been added;¹⁵ inferring therefore that Jesus’ response could be assumed complete with just the first part, which includes only the first commandment. Donald Senior comments opposing this view: “by adding ‘like it’ Matthews’s version brings the second command virtually to parity with the first.” Senior also clarifies that “neighbor” originally referred “to fellow Israelites with whom one was bound by the covenant”.¹⁶

However, Ulrich Luz provides much light to help us understand what the love of God is and how different theologians have understood it throughout the history of the church. Going back to the Middle Ages, the interpretation of love of God was understood as knowledge and obedience while the Reformation put the emphasis on knowledge. Calvin kept it in connection with keeping the commandments of the first tablet of the Decalogue. Luz highlights the western understanding of the love of God as a thought experience; often experienced as gratitude for the gifts received from God, which leads to obedience. Citing both Calvin and Augustine Luz makes the point of the special and unique happiness one experiences when in relationship with God and community.

The key points from this passage as it is explored in the commentaries are:

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1824, 2055, 2083.

¹⁵ Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 21-28* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005), Matthew. Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/45973

¹⁶ Senior, Donald. *Abingdom New Testament Commentaries Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), .253.

- The love of God must engage the total person (heart, soul, mind)
- What persons do come from their heart
- External acts are important
- Some may think the love of neighbor is an added thing, not required to do what is first

The families of the Church of Saint Mary and both Confirmation and Faith Formation programs should be teaching young people to love God and the neighbor. Families and catechists alike should not only inform young people of this Greatest Commandment but to teach it in a way to engrave this double commandment in the hearts and souls of young people. It looks like this is not happening in a lasting, life changing way.

A student must know how to express their love of God, how to live in the love of God and how to let the love of God flows around them. Families and parishes should help their children experience the love of God and help them grow in their love of God. Even though loving God is an action initiated and completed by God in the Holy Spirit, it still requires collaboration of the human person. There are actions in our part that dispose us to love God. There are also behaviors on our part that are clearly an indication of our lack of love of God.

After the age of reason, a person must be attentive to their inner response to the love of God, able to acknowledge when their actions do not show love of God and willing to repent confessing their sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

All Catholics must know that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life.¹⁷” As one who loves another, longs to be with the beloved, in the same way, a person who loves God wants to be with God, the best way to be with God and express our love for God is at the Eucharist, especially when we receive Communion. Besides uniting us to God, Holy Communion separates us from sin. The body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is "given up for us," and the blood we drink "shed for the many for the forgiveness of sins." For this reason, the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins. Another benefit of the Eucharist is that it “strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity wipes away venial sins. By giving himself to us Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and root ourselves in him.”

Do the youth know what the Greatest Commandment is? Do the Faith Formation parents know what the Greatest Commandment is? Do the Confirmation and Faith Formation Programs are designed in a way that help families, parents and students know and give priority to learn and live this Greatest Commandment?

Do the youth know what the Eucharist is? Do the Faith Formation parents know what the Eucharist is? Do the Confirmation and Faith Formation Programs are designed in a way that help families, parents and students know and give priority to the Eucharist?

What the students are learning in Faith Formation? What is the message that is being sent to families on their priorities to pass on the faith to their members at their domestic churches?

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican, 1964), 11

If families and students do not know or understand the Greatest Commandment as Catholics view it then they will not make of the Eucharist and Reconciliation a priority on their lives, then their lives will be revolving about what is stressed by social media, schools, employers, and even prominent Catholics. The world, at best, promotes worldly values, not the Gospel values and much less Catholic values. In addition, if Catholic values are promoted, like social justice, frequently those are presented in a disconnection from the love of God, and more like good acts on themselves, not because it is a commandment given by Jesus.

The way families chose to spend their Sundays comes from their heart; whatever it is that is in their hearts is what moves them to go or to spend their time in such and such activities. Current demographics at our Sunday liturgies show the vast majority of those present are older adults, usually empty nesters; very few families are present and just a handful of families with teenagers.

A first pastoral response would include a review of what the Church of Saint Mary is teaching to students in Confirmation and Faith Formation programs. The Jews were required to recite twice a day the Shema (love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind...). What is been done to emphasize the importance of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation to students and families? It seems like the efforts are centered mostly to prepare them for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist, as one-time events but not as on-going sacraments for the growing and nurturing of faith life.

EXPLORATION OF A THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

A response to the love of God requires conversion. An interpretation of the pastoral problem through the lenses of the theological concept of conversion offers multiple perspectives

to the fact of students leaving the sacraments as soon as they get Confirmed. Jim Wallis defines conversion as the New Testament invitation to pursue an entirely different course of life; assuming “that we are in the wrong path, moving away from God. It is far more than an emotional release and much more than an intellectual adherence to correct doctrine. It is a basic change in life direction.”¹⁸ “It is also an invitation to freedom and the preparation for faith.”¹⁹ Conversion, Wallis adds, is always a practical issue, always means to turn to God; it will be a scandal to accepted wisdoms, status quos and oppressive arrangements. I would describe the situation at St. Mary’s using Pope Francis words from the Joy of the Gospel “the hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity.”²⁰ After the pandemic, those words became even more apt to describe our situation. The people of Church of Saint Mary in Willmar live in a city with higher crime rate compared to the average of cities in the US. Willmar is in the 37th percentile for safety, meaning 63% of cities are safer and 37% of cities are more dangerous;²¹ more crime means more insecurity, more stress, more fear, and more anxiety. Some families have family members incarcerated, suffering of addiction, couples living in cohabitation and other lifestyles are adopted by our families are in need of conversion.

In the Old and New Testaments, conversion involved a “change of lords.” Conversion from idolatry is a constant biblical theme; -contemporary idols are not so different from those of biblical times: wealth, power, pride of self, pride of nation, sex, race, military might, etc. Conversion meant turning away from the reigning of idolatries and turning back to the true worship of the living God. Biblically, conversion means to surrender ourselves to God in every

¹⁸ Wallis, Jim. *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican, 2013), 52.

²¹ Crime Grade, accessed November 15, 2022, <https://crimegrade.org/safest-places-in-willmar-mn/>

sphere of human existence: the personal and social, the spiritual and economic, the psychological and political. Conversion is our fundamental decision in regard to God.²²

Conversion is for all, the new Christians, the ones who drifted from the Church, from God, from the sacraments; conversion is for all of us lured by sin. Conversion is the first and our daily step towards God.

To exemplify Conversion in the Christian life, Wallis highlights the characteristics of the first communities of early Christians: their particular pattern of life, a certain kind of behavior, known by their love of God and love for the needy, for the way they lived and for their beliefs.²³ Wallis also highlights the communal aspect of the conversion of the first Christians: their welcoming, their sharing, their love, and their caring attitudes to each other and all, which sharply contrasts to the culture of exclusion of our modern “Christian” societies that for example throw away food when people are starving, even in our own parish.

Maybe local domestic churches, Confirmation and Faith Formation Programs are as the ancient Greek concerned mainly with intellectual knowledge, belief, and not much with transformation, as the early Christians were concerned.²⁴ Maybe St. Mary’s Faith Formation programs do not put enough emphasis in the need for on-going conversion to keep God at the center of every personal life. Is it okay to assume what it is being done in faith formation programs is all wrong and the Church is moving away from God without even realizing it?

For Wallis, “a person undergoing conversion welcomes the liberating power of Christ on her/his life to live a life free from bondages and powers that once held them captive and

²² Wallis, Jim. *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981), p.8.

²³ *Ibid*, 15.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

fearful.²⁵” The question here is: are the families under bondage and dark powers? Or to the contrary, are all of them living in the freedom of the children of God? If that is true, why, not only Confirmation students but also families seem to have the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation in low regard? Maybe it is time to review the faith formation programs to see how Christocentric are these. Conversion is the beginning of a life in Christ. Jesus has the power to make everything new. “Heart, mind and soul, being thinking and doing -all are remade in the grace of God’s redeeming love.”²⁶

In addition, this theological reflection points to include in a possible pastoral response the evaluation of the St. Mary’s community building strategies, not only to organize events like the Fall Festival or the Gala event, a winter fundraiser, but efforts to walk together the path of holiness where everyone is intentionally included. Frequently one might wonder if their own children and the youth of the faith community would be willing to give up their lives for Christ, for the faith they profess as eager as the early Christians were. Early Christians had such conversion process that many of them preferred to lose their life than to deny Christ, the sacraments or betray their Church leaders. Any person with a heart that loves God with all its might would be willing to do that as well; but one do not expect that of a heart who does not keep the Eucharist in high regard.

In conclusion, this theological reflection offers three points to include in a possible pastoral response.

²⁵ Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

1. A review of how St. Mary's forms her students in the love of God and how she prepares them for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist, not as one-time events but as on-going sacraments.
2. Bring to the front a Christocentric approach in word and in deed for the domestic churches, Confirmation and Faith Formation Programs so they are not only concerned with intellectual knowledge and belief but also with the transformation produced by on-going conversion.
3. An evaluation of St. Mary's community building strategies to make sure these help everybody to walk together the path of holiness where all are included.

PASTORAL RESPONSE

This section of the paper proposes a constructive response in the form of a concrete plan. It helps ministers at the Church of Saint Mary know how to start approaching the situation of youth disengaged of the sacramental life of the parish; how to change it so future generations of newly confirmed youth carry out a sacramental life during their faith formation years, especially as they prepare for the Sacrament and after they receive Confirmation. The last part of the section explains why it is not healthy for a parish to continue confirming youth who are not grounded in the sacraments as they complete the faith formation program and why this situation needs to change.

Goal 1: Listening of students, parents, catechists and overall parishioners.

- a) Outcome 1: Develop a survey of students, parents and catechists.
- b) Outcome 2: Compile of the data from the survey
- c) Outcome 4: Review results of a previous survey done in the Spring of 2020, the Disciple Maker Index, and the Synod Consultation Report.
- d) Outcome 3: Analyze the data obtained through the survey, the Disciple Maker Index, and the Synod Consultation Report to assist in determining the best possible strategy to help define next steps.

Goal 2: Develop a team approach to study the data outcome from the survey, the Disciple Maker Index, the Synod Consultation Report, and this report, and ponder then draft a plan of action to respond to this pastoral problem.

- a) Outcome 1: Call for a staff meeting to report on this pastoral problem and data obtained.
- b) Outcome 2: Draft an agenda for such meeting.

Assessment Process

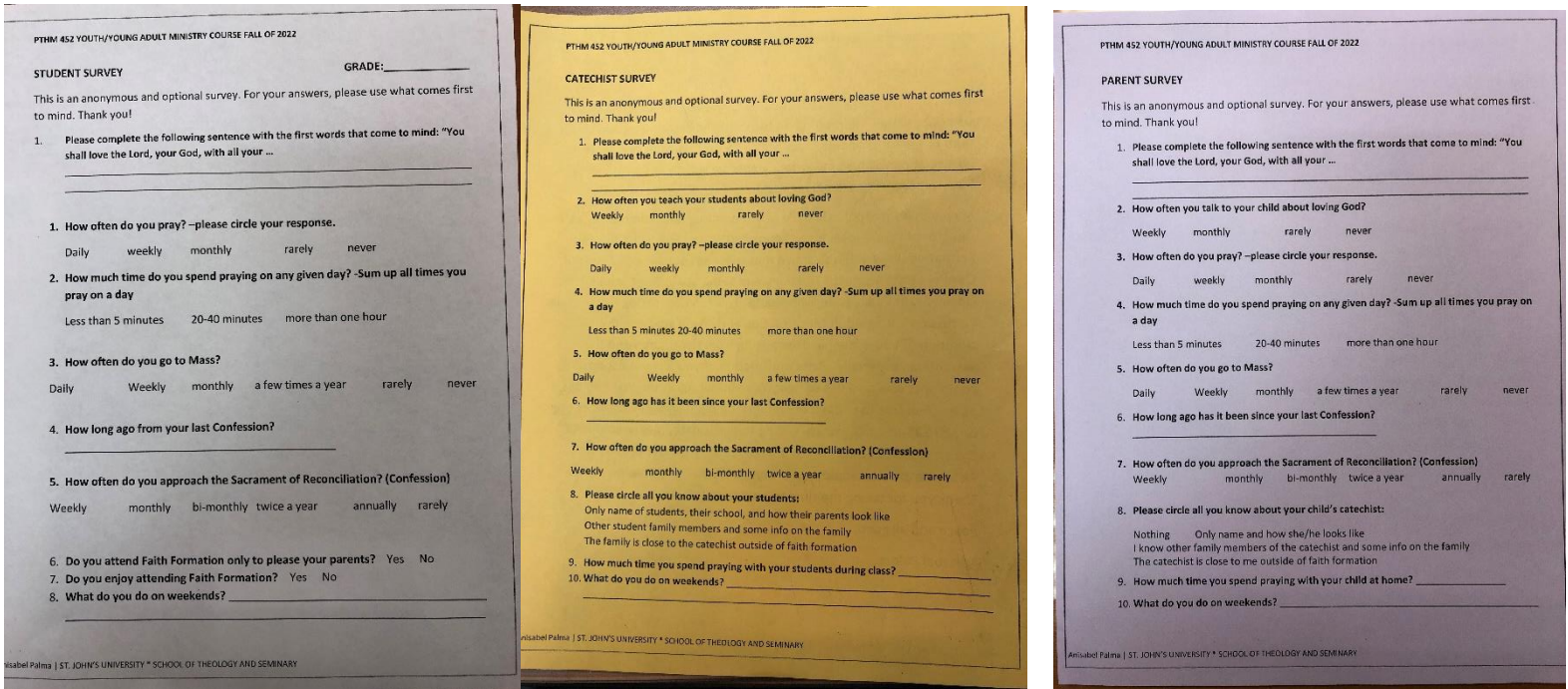
The following measures will prove the success of the plan. There will be success with this plan when the survey is distributed, responses collected, compiled, analyzed, studied, presented at a staff meeting and the staff of the Church of Saint Mary review the information and have a discussion on the pastoral problem and possible next steps.

Strategy

For the first step of the plan, it is proposed to listen to students, parents and catechists to know:

- where they are in their understanding and response to the love of God,
- the place the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Eucharist have in their lives,
- how much time they devote to their prayer life,
- the relationship between engaged members of the church (i.e. catechists) with those in the process of formation.

The surveys will be available in English and Spanish to make it accessible for all who want to participate. Suggest content for the surveys is this:



The surveys will be distributed to students, catechists, and parents on a faith formation night, they will have one week to complete the survey. After the responses have been received, the second step will be to compile the data from the survey into an Excel Spreadsheet.

Once the data is compiled, the data will be analyzed using graphs, totals, and percentages to help determine the best possible strategy to define next steps. The results of the Disciple Maker Index done in the spring of 2020 and the Synod Consultation Report will be reviewed as well as a way to listen to what parishioners in general have expressed regarding faith formation and see how their input could fit into a pastoral response.

After hearing from students, catechists, parents and overall parishioners, the work will be focused on developing a team approach to study the data outcome from the survey and this report, to ponder and draft of plan of action to respond as a parish to this pastoral problem.

The author of the paper will call for a staff meeting to report on this pastoral problem and data obtained in the survey. The following is the proposed agenda for such meeting. A more detailed agenda is included in the Appendix section at the end of this paper.

Agenda Items for a meeting with the staff of the Church of Saint Mary

- 1. Welcome and prayer**
- 2. Pastoral problem** – Confirmation students (and many other in Faith Formation programs) are not leading a sacramental life.
- 3. Understand and explain the problem.** Eucharist and Reconciliation are not priorities for Faith Formation families, Faith Formation Programs, the City of Willmar, and social media algorithms.
- 4. Theological Interpretation.** The love of God is the greatest commandment and on-going conversion is needed to respond to the love God.
- 5. Pastoral Response**
 - a. Survey Data
 - b. What can be done to respond?
 - i. Focus on the domestic church, the family
 - ii. Focus on the parish family
 - iii. Welcome everyone
 - iv. Seek commitment in everyone's part to grow in holiness.
 - v. What next steps could we take?
- 6. Thank you for your time**
- 7. Concluding Prayer**

Living a sacramental life is of paramount importance for Catholics; when Catholics deprive themselves of the graces that come through sacraments like the Eucharist and/or Reconciliation, they suffer the consequences on their own lives. Moreover, because we are all connected, their communities suffer too. The Eucharist is the source and summit of all Christian life.²⁷ It is from the Eucharist where Catholics take what they need to transform the world around them and enculturate the Gospel. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the sacrament that opens for us the mercy of God; at the same time, it reconciles us with the Church we wounded with our sins, producing healing in the church and in the person who receives the mercy of God through this sacrament. The healing provided by the sacrament of reconciliation and the nourishment from the Eucharist makes strong Catholics.

For a parish, in an society that is becoming more and more secular, it is imperative to have strong members, able to resist the world; each generation should be followed by a stronger generation in order to continue passing the faith. If the new generation is not strong in their catholic identity, grounded in their sacramental and parish life, the parish faces the risk of disappearing as we have seen in nearby parishes. If Saint Mary's wishes to continue strong for centuries to come, it needs to pay more attention to the formation of the new generation of Catholics, to the strengthening of the domestic church and the prayer life of all its members so they all become eager and intentional in leading sacramental lives, witnessing the Christian life.

²⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

APPENDIX

Agenda Items for a meeting with the staff of the Church of Saint Mary**6. Welcome and prayer**

7. **Pastoral problem** – Confirmation students (and many in Faith Formation programs) are not leading a sacramental life.
8. **Understand and explain the problem.** Eucharist and Reconciliation are not priorities for Faith Formation families, Faith Formation Programs, the City of Willmar, and social media algorithms.
9. **Theological Interpretation.** The love of God is the greatest commandment. Matthew 22:36-39. "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Students and families seem not to understand how to express the love they owe to God directly. Students seem to get mainly knowledge and beliefs from programs and less help for their on-going conversion to achieve Christological transformation.

Pastoral Response

- a. Survey Data -Is the survey good? Is more data needed?
- b. What can the staff at the Church of Saint Mary do to respond?

Here are some ideas born out of this study:

- vi. Focus on the domestic church, the family
 1. Foster a sacramental life in the families of our parish.
 2. Identify drifting, injured or hurting families and accompany them more intentionally.
- vii. Focus on our parish family
 1. Fortify the faith formation community strengthening the relationships of catechists-students-parents so they can accompany each other in the current moment in their lives and not only share the faith.
 2. Create on-going opportunities for the baby boomers to interact frequently with faith formation students so students benefit of the wisdom of older generations.
- viii. Welcome everyone no matter where they are in their sacramental life
- ix. Seek commitment in everyone's part to grow in holiness.
- x. What next steps could be taken?

8. Thank you for your time**9. Concluding Prayer**

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