



## What is “faith formation” anyway?

**D**ear Father Kerper: All of a sudden our parish has “faith formation” instead of religious education and CCD. And now kids are receiving confirmation with First Communion. I don’t see how they can possibly know enough at such a young age. What exactly is “faith formation” anyway? Just another new-fangled term?

Your suspicion about “faith formation” being just “another new-fangled” term hits the mark. After all, we do spend a lot of time tinkering with words without changing realities. However, I hope that the shift away from “religious education” to “faith formation” will eventually strengthen the Church and foster deeper personal relationships between Catholics and the Lord.

Formation is not just another term for education. Though related in some respects, they differ immensely. Here’s how.

Education transmits information and skills to students. It happens within a specific time frame. At the end of the process, a student possesses a stock of knowledge, such as a foreign language, mathematical formulae and so on.

Faith formation does much more: it

“forms” the whole person, not just a sector of the intellect. Moreover, faith formation continues forever, even beyond the grave as our relationship with God becomes richer and deeper.

Let’s take a look at the term “formation.”

Every physical object once existed as raw material, such as wood, clay, marble, grain and so on. All these materials had some sort of vague shape. But in order to become usable, someone had to shape them into a form. For example, a good carpenter can use his intellect, hands and tools to form wood derived from a tree into a beautiful cabinet. *Form, then, may add much beauty and utility to the wood.*

Human beings, like wood, need formation. We find this principle at work in the book of Genesis. The inspired writer states: “Then the Lord

God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” (Gn 2:7)

Left untouched, the “dust of the ground” had no form. And even after God formed the clay into the figure of a “mud man,” it still required the infusion of God’s sacred breath in order to come alive.

Faith formation, when done properly, imitates this divine action. Human beings come forth from their mothers as packages of raw material: unformed intellect, flesh, organs and a soul. Like wood in the hands of a skilled carpenter, newborn babies need *formation* in order to become what God intends them to be: adopted sons and daughters called to share his life.

What should good faith formation ultimately produce? A person who lives according to the Latin phrase *sentire cum ecclesia*, words from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. They mean to think, to judge, and to feel with the Church.

Such a person becomes completely and permanently *harmonized* with the mind and actions of Christ, acting and thinking *instinctively* as Christ does.

Here we see the huge difference between standard religious education and faith formation. While the Church did a reasonably good job of providing “factual knowledge” about doctrines, saints and Church laws, this has led well-instructed Catholics to tend to segregate their religious knowledge from the rest of life. As such, they often think, judge and feel *with prevailing opinions* rather than with Christ, even to the point of tolerating grave injustices and killing the innocent.

How does faith formation happen? Just turn to the Gospels and we see it. Christ, in his ongoing relationship with the Twelve Apostles, constantly engages in faith formation.

St. Peter serves as a great example of successful faith formation.

When Christ called Peter, then named Simon, he was *amorphous* — without form. For sure, he had some good raw material — physical strength, worldly experience in the fishing

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business, sincerity, an affectionate heart and simple Jewish piety. But he also had lots of bad traits: speaking before thinking, pushiness, intellectual density and fear.

Reading through the Gospels, we see how Christ gradually, gently and beautifully *formed* St. Peter from the raw material of Simon.

Three features of this delicate process stand out.

First, the Lord spent much *personal time* with Peter, conversing, traveling, sharing meals and getting to know his family and friends. The Lord *befriended* Peter. St. John recalled that Jesus once said to Peter and the other apostles, “I do not call you slaves any longer...I have called you friends.” (*Jn 15:15*) Peter attended no classes and had no textbook. Instead, the faith formation from Jesus consumed every waking moment of Peter’s life.

Second, much of the Lord’s faith formation work consisted in getting Peter to unlearn many things. Peter had to change his understanding of power, success, ethnic pride and freedom. Moreover, he had to reverse completely his expectations of the Messiah, moving away from seeking a triumphant military-figure wrapped in greatness to the Suffering Servant nailed to the cross.

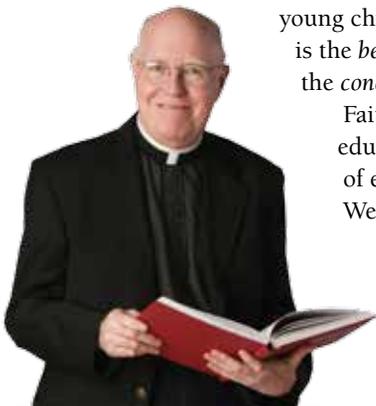
Third, the Lord formed Peter through trial, error and even stern correction. Recall how Jesus severely reprimanded Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan... You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” (*Mt 16:23*)

In the end, Peter and the other Apostles did what St. Ignatius promoted: *sentire cum ecclesia* — they thought, judged and felt with the Church. The desired outcome of faith formation, which never ends, is a multitude of ordinary Christian people who perfectly and always resemble Christ in thought, word and deed.

You mentioned your fear that children celebrating both confirmation and Eucharist in third grade under the restored order of the sacraments of initiation would somehow reduce the religious knowledge of Catholic children. I hear this a lot. However, we want *formed*, not *instructed*, Catholics. And “restored order” is one foundation of faith formation.

By administering all three sacraments of initiation — baptism, confirmation and Eucharist — in early childhood, the “breath of God” enters into young children as it entered into Adam. It is the *beginning* of faith formation, not the *conclusion*, as so many sadly think.

Faith formation, unlike religious education, demands the involvement of every Catholic, not just catechists. We “do” faith formation for ourselves and others as Christ did it — by walking with one another, especially those closest to us; by constantly “unlearning” the predominant values of our society; and by being good Christians, infused with the breath of God. ■



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