Using Imagination in Teaching Christian Doctrine in Religious Education

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The Christian life is based on the conviction that God has spoken to humanity and has revealed the central truths of faith.[1] In Christian religious parlance, revelation refers to the free manifestation of God, which lies beyond the normal reach of human inquiry. This revelation is normally mediated through ordinary human experiences in the world; through symbol–that is to say, through an externally perceived sign that works mysteriously on the human consciousness to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define. Revelatory symbols express God's self-communication[2] and revelation reaches human beings through symbols, primarily on the level of imagination. This article explores the use of imagination in teaching the Christian faith, drawing from the insights of John Henry Newman, Sandra M. Schneiders, and William F. Lynch on how imagination can address some problems in teaching Christian doctrine.

Use of Imagination in Education

What is Imagination?

There are three common misconceptions about imagination. First, imagination is often equated with illusion or fantasy,

1 Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (Manila: CBCP/ECCCE, 2005), no. 61.

2 Avery Dulles, "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (March 1980): 55-56, https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398004100102.

with things that are fanciful, irrational, and detached from reality. Second, imagination is sometimes deemed an undesirable quality because it is associated with useless play. Third, imagination is seen as an obstacle to objective knowledge and truth, with imagined things as unreliable sources of knowledge or insight. If one follows the above misconceptions, one might conclude that imagination cannot be used in teaching.

However, human imagination is precisely the power to represent *the real* more fully and truly than it appears to the senses and in its ideal and universal character.[3] The human mind has the creative ability to see reality—what is real—and also to express both what is not present to the senses now and what is beyond sensible reality. As the great philosopher Aristotle claims, there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses.[4] Therefore, human imagination is the creative capacity to go beyond immediate sensible data to form, recall, and relate ideas and objects presented by the senses. The special power of the imagination is its ability to draw together the concrete, specific *reality* sensed and its universal idea or concept.[5] Brelsford affirms that

> Imagination is productive and necessary for knowledge, rather than a fantastical impediment to true knowledge. Rather than an impediment to true knowledge, the creative processes of human imagination lead to reliable knowledge of the real world.[6]

3 Frederick G. McLeod, "Imagination within the Act of Faith," *Review for Religious* 46 (March/April 1986): 214.

4 *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), s.vv. "Aristotle."

5 Phillip S. Keane, *Christian Ethics and Imagination* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 81.

6 Theodore Brelsford, "Religious Imagination as Problem," *Religious Education* 110, no. 3 (May 2015): 251, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2015.1039357

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Imagination is the ability of the human mind to generate, give birth to, or produce new knowledge from fragments of existing knowledge. It is productive because it creates new learning and is, therefore, necessary for growth in knowledge. It must be understood as an important aspect of human knowledge and an essential part of the process of teaching and learning.

There are three dimensions of imagination[7] that are essential to teaching: process, content, and action. First, imagination is a core process through which transformative learning occurs by which the mindset of students can radically change. Second, imagination is the power to give form to human knowing, the capacity to name the content of human thought by employing images, especially in teaching. And third, imagination is an act of creativity because it manifests embodied action in the world, moving and directing the human mind, heart, and hand to drive a person to concrete action. When teachers evoke the students' imagination, students are led towards creative engagement of the world, and teaching can become truly effective and life-transforming.

When these three dimensions of imagination are engaged in teaching, the educational process brings about positive change in the students' way of thinking, feeling, and acting. The students can articulate their experiences by using images and interpreting them as significant factors in understanding the meaning of their experiences. They are inspired to act upon their realizations and insights and translate them into concrete gestures that can contribute to the transformation of society.

7 Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 139-41.

Understanding Students in Today's Digital Culture

Digital culture is an overarching concept used to describe the pervasive influence of technology and limitless access to information through the internet that significantly shapes the way people think, behave, communicate, and interact.[8] The digital culture is not a parallel reality to the real world, although they are currently intertwined, and their mutual influence can no longer be ignored. The term digital natives refer to the people who have been reared within this culture.

> The number of digital natives is growing. By 2020, there will be approximately 4.25 billion 'digital natives' under the age of 34. The number of 'net experienced' people in the aging part of the population is also growing – what will this mean for the Networked Society? . . . The generation of people born 1985 or later have grown up in a world of computers, mobile phones, and the internet – and this has shaped them and their time. The adoption of these tools is continuing to shape their behavior, and as Marshall McLuhan, a media education expert, said, "The medium is the message" – that is, the medium influences how the message is perceived.[9]

A number of characteristics of these digital natives are worth pointing out. First, they have a new category of time and space. There is no longer a delineation between the real and virtual worlds. Whether within or outside the internet—whether online or offline—they freely move as if both worlds are one and the same environment instantaneously and simultaneously. Everything and everyone becomes accessible

8 Clayton d'Arnault, "What is Digital Culture?" *Digital Culturist Blog,* October 21, 2015, https://digitalculturist.com/what-is-digital-culture-5cbe91bfad1b (accessed March 24, 2017).

9 Mikael Eriksson Björling, "Why is Innovation the Buzzword Right Now?" *Ericsson Blog,* March 27, 2018, https://www.ericsson.com/en/blog/2018/3/why-is-innovation-the-buzzword-right-now (accessed July 9, 2021).

right here and now with just a click of the mouse or a touch of a digital screen. For the digital natives, the here and now matters most. They are fast responders delivering immediate responses and are also visually-spatially proficient at integrating the visual with the physical. One example that illustrates this is the interactive videogames that simulate particular life scenes and require both keen attention to visual and active physical participation.

Second, digital natives are multi-sensory. They can grasp and understand better when all their senses are stimulated: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and detecting and decoding unspoken messages. Visual images, sounds, and hands-on activities are more engaging for them. In short, digital culture is participatory. While digital natives are content-makers and sharers, they can also see an underlying thread that connects seemingly fragmented images and messages. They are inductive discoverers who can learn through discovery rather than explanation and are searchers who are ever eager for additional or deeper information. They gather information from multiple sources and are likely to overview or scan vast amounts of information quickly. They can read and interpret visual images and icons, easily switching from linear to parallel thinking.

Third, digital natives are adept at multi-tasking, capable of doing several tasks simultaneously without being distracted. They can study, listen to music, chat with friends online, prepare a project, and eat their meals all at the same time. They can change and shift their mental channels without any effort at all. They are actually quite attentive in all these tasks even if they do not appear so. Adults often judge them to be superficial, but this is not actually the case. They are good at

shifting attention between tasks and are quickly adapting to constant change.

However, digital natives are also at risk. While they often seem cool and smart, they also express their need for guidance and points of reference as they navigate the digital world. The addictive influence of new media threatens to misinform—and deform—young people's thinking, choices, and actions. The Synod of Bishops recognizes the inherent risk the digital culture brings to people:

> ... when the digital culture is taken to an extreme [that] includes selfish concentration on oneself and personal needs; an overemphasis on the emotive aspects of relations and social bonds; the loss of objective values of experience, reflection and thought, which are reduced in many cases, to ways of reconfirming one's individualistic feelings; the progressive alienation of the moral and social dimensions of life which makes others a mirror of self or simply a spectator to one's actions; and finally, the formation of a culture centered on passing novelties, the present moment and outward appearances, indeed, a society which is incapable of remembering the past and with no sense of the future.[10]

The digital culture is thus a fertile ground for the imagination to thrive and be used to its highest potential. Imagination can help these digital natives to recognize the perduring values in human life, such as authentic friendship, commitment, and loving relationships. Students of today are native speakers of the digital language of computers, internet, mobile phones,

10 Synod of Bishops, "The Vocation and mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World," Vatican Archive, December 9, 2014, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.html (accessed at July 9, 2021).

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and social media. Instant messaging and virtual connectivity form an integral part of their daily lives.

Teachers who were not born in the digital world are called digital immigrants who need to adapt to this digital environment, learning the new language but frequently retaining their native accent as seen in their old ways of thinking and doing things. These digital immigrant teachers often appear to the students as foreigners speaking an almost unintelligible language when they lecture to them, leaving students wondering just what they are saying because they cannot connect.

Teachers need to realize that their students grew up to the twitch speed of video games and MTV, honed to the instantaneity of hypertext, instant messaging, downloaded music, mobile phones readily on hand, and e-libraries on their tablets and netbooks. They are networked and online most of the time, having little patience for lectures and step-by-step patterns of instruction and learning. More often than not, digital natives feel that the lessons of their digital immigrant teachers are not worth paying attention to, especially compared to the multi-sensory experience offered them by media in all the various forms of media. And yet teachers blame them for not paying attention.

Instead, teachers have to rethink their methodologies and start learning to communicate in the language and style of their students. It does not mean changing the meaning or content of what is truly important, but saying them in a way that keeps up with the pace and speed of their students (i.e., in a less step-by-step approach, more in parallel thinking, and making use of images that speak more convincingly to them). It is a real challenge for digital immigrant teachers to use their own imagination to discover how to teach these digital natives more effectively.

Imagination for Effective Teaching and Learning

Effective education in the classroom is marked by knowledge generation and proactive participation, which calls for the intentional or purposeful use of the imagination. Participation in what is imagined makes imagination intentional and meaningful. Imagination is always related to and informed by a memory which provides continuity with the past and becomes a point of reference that lead to new and deeper meaning.[11] In fact, imaginative teaching is an intentional act that involves: 1) respect for students' subjectivity and inherent nature to explore; 2) allowance of space for the use of their senses and interpretative ability; 3) thoughtfully imposed limits for them to break from conventional thought and action, and 4) collaborative learning that develops in them an empathic appreciation for different perspectives.[12]

These four essential elements come into play when the teacher creatively engages the students in interactive learning that goes way beyond paper and pen, chalk-talk, or whiteboard approach in education. One can imagine a different kind of classroom setting where the students take an active role in the different moments of the class and the teacher becomes the guide that directs the whole process of education with clarity and creativity.

Imagination operates by involving the human senses, reason or intelligence, will, and emotions. This happens in a three-step process. First, imagination is triggered by data coming from experience (i.e., a word or phrase, music or

11 Catherine Dooley, "Give Imagination a Chance!" *Living Light* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 21.

12 Christopher Cunningham, "Imagination: Active in Teaching and Learning," July 1, 2015, http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1063&context=teachlearnstudent (accessed on December 5, 2016).

https://publications.lst.edu/

sound, a taste or smell, a picture or a place).[13] Through the five senses of touch, hearing, sight, taste, and smell, the ordinary sensation and perception processes occur. Imagination forms images that come from something known through experience. Second, reason or intelligence controls and suspends judgment while comparing and contrasting the images formed as a direct response to emotions evoked by the sensible reality perceived. Senses bring out new insights and broaden horizons. Third, through imagination, students can explore and expand their understanding evoked by the creative use of their senses and their capacity for an "out of the box" interpretation.

Imagination fosters effective teaching and learning in three ways: first, imagination enables students to see possibilities. It discloses a reality that does not yet exist but is possible. In remembering images formed by the interplay of all the senses, a new way of looking at persons and events and new insights are born. Imagination is about

> ... awakening and disclosure of hope in situations of concrete particularity where meaning is reduced to the limits of what we already see, hear, and expect. To be hopeful in a world where wholeness, community, and peace for persons and groups so often remain "unseen, unheard, and unexpected" requires an imaginative capacity to transcend the possible and the already-known.[14]

Second, imagination generates empathy that enables students to put themselves in another person's place or situation. It "feeds one's capacity to feel one's way into another

13 Dooley, "Give Imagination as Chance!," 20.

14 Joyce Ann Mercer, "Editorial: Imagination and Religious Education," *Religious Education* 111, no. 4 (August 2016): 345, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1201996.

vantage point"[15] and makes empathy possible. It is an aspect of cognitive capacity that gives credence to alternative realities. This means that one becomes open to possibilities other than what is familiar and commonplace experience. Empathy becomes a requisite part of education in contexts ever more diverse and complex, in which the ability to join with others depends on empathic regard for those whose viewpoints or life situations may be quite different from one's own.[16] People become open to welcoming differences more as a richness rather than impoverishment and more as a venue for unity despite diversity rather than a dividing factor.

Third, imagination fosters transformation that enables students to change for the better. It begins with forming images that evoke new ways of looking at reality and give rise to new insights that challenge old ways of perception and understanding. Imagination enables individuals to relate these new insights and realizations with concrete experience of persons and events that can become a paradigm for a new way of being and doing. In her talk, "Teaching and the Imagination," Yale School of Divinity professor Dr. Emilie M. Townes affirmed that imagination liberates and educates for transformation.[17]

The experience of Dr. Townes is an example of how imagination becomes an essential part of transformative education. She described herself as a Black middle-class girl headed toward womanhood in the South in the late 1950s until the early 1970s. She and her family experienced racial discrimination, which puzzled her, and she struggled against it as

15 Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 36-37.

16 Mercer, "Editorial: Imagination and Religious Education," 346.

17 Ibid., 345.

something that makes absolutely no sense. She underscored the power of life-changing education wherein she was taught to dream, and in the process, she realized that to dream is to put a high value in cultivating one's imagination. Through imagination, she was able to see new images that counter racism and everything else that devalues and denigrates life and human dignity.

Through transformative education, a radical shift happened in her thoughts, feelings, and actions, i.e., in her way of being in the world, her understanding of self and others, and her way of relating with them. She attributed to imagination the power to liberate and educate for transformation which will "challenge our students, ourselves and the educational structures we are in to dream of more expansive and just spaces for people to live in—and not a space for a special select few, and not only do we dream it, we build it."[18] Townes challenged herself, her students, and the educational structures to dream of more expansive and just spaces for people to live in – and not a space for a special select few, and not only to dream it but to build it.[19] Through the use of imagination, the process of transformative education can be carried out effectively even today.

Imagination and Teaching the Faith

Christian faith is kept alive through imagination because faith is embodied in symbolic language metaphor, parable, psalms, and myth. Similarly, Christian faith can only be

18 Emilie M. Townes, "Teaching and Imagination," *Religious Education* 111, no. 4 (August 2016): 367-368, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1191586.

19 Transformative Learning Center, "Teaching for Change: Engaging in Transformative Education," http://www.teaching4change.edu.au/node/4 (accessed February 14, 2017).

appropriated by a corresponding act of imaginative insight.[20] Christian doctrines are the high expressions of human imaginative insight because—as St. Augustine suggests— God is a poet, and He communicates with His creature in an imaginative mode. Human response to the divine cannot but take the same imaginative form. The urgent challenge for teachers is how to inspire students to use imagination in keeping the faith irresistibly vital, especially for today's hyper-connected generation.

Three Common Problems in Teaching the Faith

NCDP 248 identifies a common weakness among religion teachers: the presentation of doctrines merely "as a factual information, or as abstract, impersonal propositions that have to be memorized as head knowledge, but with little or no practical relevance to daily life." This way through which doctrines are taught makes them appear as static dead formulas (*NCDP* 249).

Based on the experience of religion teachers, three major problems in religious education can be identified: 1) faith is often reduced to simply notional concepts, at times depicting itself as unreal or fantastic ideas; 2) the Christian faith is presented as something floating, because it is not presented as intrinsically grounded in Sacred Scriptures, Church teaching, and human experience; and 3) faith is diminished to trite, partial, and fragmented pieces of information, with its depth of meaning impoverished and *essential paradoxical characteristics ignored*.

20 Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

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John Henry Newman's Religious Imagination

John Cavadini, the former chair of the theology department in Notre Dame University, observes that many Catholics remain ignorant of their faith[21] even after years of being educated in Catholic schools. He blames the problematic way of teaching the faith that has emphasized head knowledge of the Christian faith, thus failing to integrate faith into life. This troublesome way of teaching the faith has simply made students repeat facts and figures that are often repetitious, boring, irrelevant, far-fetched from their life experience, disconnected from their search for answers and meaning in life, from their aspirations for what matters, from their thirst for something more, and their longing for authenticity and true happiness.

Imagination needs to be recovered if religious education is to be truly what it is—an education in the faith which is illuminative (faith that seeks understanding), performative (faith that does justice), and fiducial (faith that worships and prays). A major challenge for teachers is how to teach in a manner that brings out the role of the imagination as a real grasping, living, and communicating of the truths of the Christian faith. There is a need to go beyond transmitting facts and figures which do not touch or inspire the students' lives. Teachers' capacity to evoke the students' imagination needs to be enhanced.

Imagination is fundamental to the Christian faith. Imagination involves seeing spiritual reality through material reality. Revelation is mediated through material reality, making use of visible signs to manifest invisible realities and passing the way of the finite to to the infinite. And it is

21 John C. Cavadini. "Ignorant Catholics: The Alarming Void in Religious Education," *Commonweal* (April 9, 2004): 12-14.

imagination that enables the believer to see what is invisible to the eye, fostering a real grasp of the faith that is necessary for the integration of faith and life.

John Henry Newman says that religious imagination leads to faith as a real grasp of the Christian truth. His insights on religious imagination maintain that imagination is the experiential contact between God and human persons always and everywhere. Revelation takes root in the concrete and living soil of communal experience, and above all, in the imagination. For Newman, faith as a real grasp of Christian truth always involves concrete historical engagement and participation, a living assent that must be kindled anew in Christian communities.[22]

Imagination, for Newman, is the "total act by which we take hold of a real object."[23] It is an ability to take hold of God as the real object of faith in one's personal experience that calls for self-appropriation or subjective integration that, in turn, leads to personal conversion. The objective dimension of faith (the content – *fides quae*) must be integrated with the subjective, existential, experiential dimension (the act of believing – *fides qua*) that makes for the faith response of the person. Religious imagination is necessary for understanding faith in its three essential characteristics.

First, religious imagination is a real grasp of faith and a dynamic assent to faith because it is based on a positive understanding of the mystery. Faith's relevance to life is implied in what Newman termed as "real" as the opposite of "notional" which is detached from decision and commitment.

22 Christopher Pramuk, "'They Know Him By His Voice': Newman on the Imagination, Christology, and the Theology of Religions," *Heythrop* 48, no. 1 (January 2007): 61-85.

23 Terrence Merrigan, *Clear Head and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991), 50.

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If religious imagination is disregarded in teaching the faith, the great realities of faith, such as loving communion, can remain vague, conceptual, or "unreal." With religious imagination, loving communion, like faith itself, will not remain a "notional" or pious exhortation but can take fire and flesh, becoming a source of dynamic conversion and action.[24]

Second, religious imagination is subjective or person-centered. Imagination fosters a positive understanding of the mystery of faith that is holistic and coherent, calling for an owning and integrating this understanding in one's personal life. Newman calls this as "a living hold on truths,"[25] or faith as lived experience. This characteristic of religious imagination relates to the integration within the person, the subject who believes. Compared to the idea of faith as pure abstract thinking prevalent during his time, Newman's approach to faith is personalist. For Newman, faith is based on a person's spiritual and moral qualities and lived dispositions. Faith involves a process of personally discovering the truth and acting on it. It is the capacity to grasp what is real that begins from one's personal seeking and finding. In his book *Grammar of Assent,* he calls faith as "imaginative assent." The positive role of imagination in faith is to realize faith, in the sense of making God real in a person's life.[26]

Third, religious imagination is holistic because it integrates faith's subjective and objective dimensions. Both its objective content (what is believed) and its subjective aspect (the act of believing) bear the two sides of the paradoxical character of

24 Michael Paul Gallagher, "The Quality of Mercy: Pope Francis' Vision for Today's Culture," a talk delivered in the Loyola School of Theology's Theological Hour, August 27, 2014.

25 Magill, "Newman's Moral Imagination," 458.

26 Michael Paul Gallagher, *Faith Maps: Ten Religious Explorers from Newman to Joseph Ratzinger* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2010), 14-15.

faith. Through the use of religious imagination, the person assents to what is believed (content) in a personal way that touches the heart and transforms life (act). Such integration is necessary for a holistic personal response of faith to God within a community of faith.

The salvific truths of faith are essentially interrelated and interconnected as the whole deposit of the revelation of God. By relating them to one another, the meaning of the truths greatly abounds. To understand any particular doctrine means to see its connections with the other truths of the faith. For example, to understand the doctrine of the Incarnation means seeing the connections, implications, and consequences of the Word of God becoming flesh to the doctrine of creation and redemption. sThe use of imagination assists the individual in ascertaining the interrelations of the truths of faith and their relation to human life.

For Newman, "the heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination."[27] He underlined that "faith needs to be discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination"[28] which gives "a living hold on truths" and opens the door towards "habits of personal religion."[29] Unless religious truth touches a person's imagination, it will fail to become personally alive.[30] The objective dimension of faith touches and transforms the person's heart by passing through religious imagination. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, the image of the father evokes in the reader sentiments of mercy and compassion for the sinner who is not a stranger but his own son who was starving

27 John Henry Newman, *Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1995), 92.

28 Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 98.

29 Ibid., 117.

30 Michael Paul M. Gallagher, "Karl Rahner: The Magnetism of Mystery," in *Faith Maps* (New York: Paulist, 2010), 15.

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to death and abandoned; while the image of the prodigal son presents an image of humility and repentance. Conversion is often brought about when the heart is touched by God's merciful love represented through powerful images.

Newman's religious imagination is the locus where faith could become spiritually real. The focus is not on pure thinking but on the process of discovering the truth and acting on it. This is what Newman refers to as "real assent." The opposite of real is notional, implying an intellectualism detached from decision and commitment. The imagination, and not the intellect on its own, is the human sensibility where the realities of faith are best discerned and appropriated. Acceptance of the truths of faith can remain cold and ineffective; when imagination is not kindled, and hearts are not inflamed. But truth can work "a revolution in the mind" when it is "held in the imagination" and embraced with real assent."[31] Imagination that is awakened and rekindled addresses faith that has become impersonal and becomes fruitfully existential. It touches and transforms a person's life**.**

Through religious imagination, a person arrives at a certitude and concrete religious commitment rather than through mere intellectual reflection. It is an understanding that goes beyond analysis and logical reasoning.[32] Imagination is the capacity to recognize the truth and be certain about it through converging clues that affirm the truth that are grasped intuitively. God becomes real to the human heart. Faith does not remain at the notional level, but it leads a person to a change of heart.[33] Only when a religious truth touches the imagination can it become personally alive and transforming.

31 Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 126-27.

32 "Karl Rahner: The Magnetism of Mystery," 16.

33 Ibid., 22.

Sandra Schneiders's Paschal Imagination

Another problematic way of teaching the Christian faith is presenting the truths as partial, floating pieces of information that have no historical roots and bear no relevance to life because these are not related to Sacred Scriptures, Church Teaching, and human experience.

Christian doctrines are often taught as separate topics in themselves without interconnections. Students cannot see the interconnections of the truths of faith when imagination is not engaged. Furthermore, doctrines are not presented as saving truths of faith that are grounded in Scriptures from which they derive their meaning and purpose for salvation. They are not explained and deepened as part of the living Tradition of the Church, thus reinforcing the tendency of reducing them into empty and dead formulas that only serve as objects for the mental exercise of memorization in view of a pen and paper exam.

However, the truths of faith are not alien to the human person. They are intrinsically related to a person's being and becoming. For instance, when one professes faith in God as the Creator of Heaven and earth, it is implied that one also affirms being a creature dependent on God for his existence and fully trusting in Him because it is in Him that one lives, moves, and exists (cf. Acts 17:28).

Sandra Schneiders's paschal imagination inspires a holistic understanding of Christian faith that is grounded in Scriptures, Church teaching, and human experience. Paschal imagination urges for a holistic interpretation of Scripture. It is a constructive imagination that intends to show the interconnection of the past, present, and future in reference to Christ. Jesus Christ is the same Risen Saviour for all times and seasons—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This imagination

has a concrete effect on the whole cognitive-affective capacity of the person under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus, which enables the person to grasp the paschal wholeness and character of the event and thus enter into an existential participation in Christ's mystery.[34]

This Paschal imagination has the power to influence the past, present, and future of a Christian's life. By reimagining their past journey with Jesus, the early Christians saw new connections and insights about who Jesus was and who they were. They discovered new meanings and deeper reasons for interpreting their present life, and they gained greater hope to move towards the future with the glorified Risen Jesus.[35]

Schneiders asserts that the Gospels are the product of paschal imagination. The first Christians exercised their paschal imagination, inspired by the Spirit, in giving witness to the Risen Christ. The witness is recorded is the New Testament texts.[36] In the same vein, this paper proposes to see Christian doctrine as a fruit of the paschal imagination of the Church who continues to witness to Christ in the Christian doctrines it professes. As such, Paschal imagination can also be used to view participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ as the optic from which to understand Christian faith. By showing how Christian faith flows from the living Word of God in Scriptures through paschal imagination, the truths of faith come alive as saving truths.

Schneiders's paschal imagination can be adapted as a way to understand Christian faith more holistically. The saving

34 Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 208-18.

35 Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 107.

36 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 107.

message of the doctrines of faith can be interpreted and deepened in the light of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Paschal imagination is possible through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, who always leads Christians to remember the image of Christ as redemptive or salvific. The paschal image of Christ is always redemptive because through it believers come in contact with the one who lived and died a truly free life in the past, but is now risen and alive, and is eschatologically seated in glory with the Father.[37]

As the Gospels are the fruit of the paschal imagination of the early Church, Christian faith can also be seen as a response to God's revelation, a response borne from the paschal imagination of the Church over time. With the use of paschal imagination, the same characteristics of the Jesus-image of the early Christians can now be attributed to the Christian faith in order to bring out its holistic meaning.

First, Christian faith must be taught not with static facts but as a dynamic reality. Christian faith is ever-evolving and developing because it is alive and dynamic, always open to new horizons. It is much more like a stream of an ever-flowing river of life than a museum piece from bygone days.[38] The living truths of Christian faith, which stem from God's revelation, are not static conceptual content but the dynamic self-gift of the living God.[39] They are not dead formulas because they are grounded on God's living Word in Scriptures and are the constitutive elements of the living Tradition of the Church whose living faith continues to grow throughout the ages. The

37 Gerald Bednar, *Faith as Imagination: The Contribution of William Lynch, S.J.* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 93.

38 Thomas H. Groome, "Catechesis and Religious Education: Let's Stay Together," *Living Light* 39, no. 3 (1992): 39.

39 Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in the New Testament Interpretation," *Theological Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 1982): 65.

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Christian truths formulated as doctrines are expressions about God who cannot be fully contained by the Church and draws Christians to what is more beyond themselves. Christian doctrines are a fundamental expression of the nature of the Christian God who relates with his people as Trinity and in whom Christians gain identity through baptism.[40]

Second, the Christian faith must be taught as a guide to interpreting Scriptures and understanding of the Christian life in the light of God's revelation in Christ. These truths are the "rule of faith" that provide a measure or norm for how Christians should read the Scriptures and how they should live. They serve as the basis for reading Scripture as a whole, though they do not exhaust its meaning. They provide a normative guide for Christian life by establishing the right belief (orthodoxy) and the right practice (orthopraxy) resulting from right belief.[41]

Third, Christian faith must be taught as never fully exhausted and articulated. Having its source in the revelation of the living God throughout the history of salvation that finds fulfillment in Christ's Paschal mystery, Christian faith is expressed in doctrines that are articulations of the paschal imagination of the Church from its beginning until the end of time. They are part of the living tradition of a community of faith, and as such, they are constantly enlarged by their interaction with and integration into the theology and spirituality of successive generations. More insightful nuanced reflections about the truths of faith develop through time. One example can be the understanding of the Church from a hierarchical concept to that of being the people of God. This

40 Mark D. Chapman, "Why Do We Still Recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist?," *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 2 (Sept. 2005), 221-22.

41 Luke Timothy Johnson, "What the Creed Is and What It Does," *The Creed* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 46, 49, 61.

is clearly illustrated in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (9-17). As a consequence, the teaching about Mary as the Mother of God in *Lumen Gentium* (52-69) further deepened and developed into the image of Mary as the Mother of the Church, the people of God and the Model of the Church and of the New Evangelization.

Fourth, the paschal imagination by which Christian faith is articulated, interpreted, understood, and deepened, is bearing upon the past, present, and future of the Church. A concrete example can be given here to illustrate this trans-historical mark of paschal imagination. The formulaic, doctrinal summary of the fundamental Christian truths expressed in the creed probably originated in the liturgical worship of the early Church (past). In the baptismal rite, proclaiming the creed marked the point of transition by which the newly baptized entered the Christian community. Today, the creed now effects that same transition wherein the faithful can enter and participate in the liturgy of the Eucharist (present). The creed draws the reading of the Scripture into a focus on the central mystery of the incarnation and redemption, and toward the hope of a future resurrection (future). Later on, in history, the creed was developed as a way to distinguish between right and wrong beliefs within the community of faith in response to the different heresies that arose.

Fifth, the Christian faith must be taught as the embodiment of living and saving truths since they relate Christians to the God who is loved as Father, Son, and Spirit. The symbolic grasping of the sublime truths is not merely intellectual but an imaginative and affective response. It is the feeling of love working through imagination.[42]

42 Thomas K. Carr, *Newman and Gadamer: Toward a Hermeneutics of Religious Knowledge* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1996), 173.

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The creed, at its heart, is "belief in a name, and not in notions"[43]—the name of God, which always lies beyond any infinite expression. It is a declaration of belief and trust in the eternal name into which Christians have been baptized, and in which the whole Church and each of its member stands. By professing the truths of faith, Christians claim their absolute dependence in and relationship with the Triune God, drawing them away from reliance on self towards full trust in him.[44] It is not by chance that the word "creed," from the Latin *credere*, which means "to invest one's heart," refers to the fundamental priorities freely chosen by Christians that shape who they are and how they live.[45]

Lynch's Ironic Christic Imagination

There is the temptation to teach the faith in a one-sided manner. Here, Christian faith is limited to a trite, uni-dimensional, and impoverished meaning. Its holistic expression and paradoxical characteristics are ignored. Teaching the faith that emphasizes only its doctrinal basis becomes dogmatism. Teaching the faith that highlights only its moral aspect results to activism. Teaching the faith that prioritizes only its worship aspect ends up in ritualism.[46] Conversely, all three aspects can be integrated for a truly holistic response of faith through the use of imagination.

Moreover, there is the need to integrate the paradoxical characteristics of faith. To accept only one aspect of reality

43 Chapman, "Why Do We Still Recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist," 216.

44 Ibid., 215-217.

45 Thomas H. Groome, "In What Will We Invest? – Risking the Leap of Faith," in *What Makes Us Catholic* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), 178.

46 The Diagram of Catholic Faith in *NCDP*, footnote for paragraph no. 200 on Faith as Integrated Believing, Doing and Trusting.

would reduce the fullness and richness of its meaning. This is also true for Christian faith. The human person encounters one's rational limits when facing the paradoxes of faith. For instance, on how to reconcile a loving God with the reality of human suffering in the world that He so loved.[47] Faith has two poles[48] that point to impossible tensions of opposites. This means that there are always two seemingly contradictory realities taking place in faith that in reality, do not contradict each other. These two realities "constitute the essential qualities of authentic Christian faith which have to be brought together" (*NCDP* 202) to understand its depth. Faith taken as the interrelation of the two realities is immeasurably richer than taking faith disconnected from the other. A one-sided view of faith is an impoverishment of faith.

William Lynch proposes ironic Christic imagination as key to reconciling the paradoxes and overcoming faith's fragmentation. Ironic Christic imagination is illustrated in the integration of the paradoxical qualities of faith such as: in death, there is life; in losing, one finds; in sadness, there is joy; in the cross, there is victory; in obedience, there is freedom; in darkness, there is light. It is a way to understand Jesus and his mission and understand the paradoxes of faith.

Irony refers to putting together relative opposites that mutually validate each other's truth and value. It is the distinctive paradigm or patterning of facts, a re-composing in which a fact (e.g., "having nothing") is seen within the creative

47 Groome, *What Makes Us Catholic*, 192.

48 Werner Jeanrond, "Faith Formation and Freedom: Categories of Religious Education in the Church," in *Religious Education of Boys and Girls,* ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Concilium* 4 (London: SCM Press, 2002), 64.

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presence of a contrary (e.g., "and possessing all things").[49] According to Lynch's own words,

> ... imagination composes reality with irony (of co-existing opposites) and with ironic images. Irony deals not with appearances but with the very opposite of appearances and keeps these opposites together in a single act of the imagination. Example, what is power? Who has power? Appearance will say the powerful have power, but the Beatitudes and the sermon on the mount say the opposite. Like imagination itself, faith moves below appearances into existence.[50]

Imagination, for Lynch, is existential, experiential, and involves the whole person, "all his resources, not only his seeing and hearing and touching but also his history, his education, his feelings, his wishes, his love, his hate, faith and unfaith, insofar as they all go into the making of his images of the world."[51]As such, imagination can enlarge itself and encompass reality in its wholeness, paradoxes included, and not just in fragments or pieces.

Three points can be drawn from Lynch's insights: first, ironic Christic imagination attempts to keep diverse relative viewpoints together while acknowledging the extent to which each relative viewpoint is true. In that way, one is prevented from absolutizing one's relative position.[52] Similarly, imagination will always be the enemy of the absolutizing instinct of a reductionist faith because it refuses to present facts as scattered absolutes.[53] Through ironic imagination, a truth is

49 William F. Lynch, *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 14.

50 Lynch, *Images of Faith* , 84.

51 Ibid., 18.

52 Bednar, *Faith as Imagination,* 65.

53 William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless (*Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965), 243.

affirmed through seemingly opposite realities. Life comes through death; strength comes through weakness, exaltation through humility, and fullness through emptiness. Truth is seen within the creative presence of its contrary.[54]

Second, ironic Christic imagination is attained through an attentive appropriation or personal owning of the paradigm or pattern of the life of Christ who reconciled paradoxical realities in himself, thus, making it Christic. In the life of Christ, life comes through death, strength through weakness, and exaltation through humility. Imagination attempts to maintain the pattern of transformation that Christ brought about throughout his life.

And third, ironic Christic imagination enables Christians to see who they really are in the new light of the life of Christ. It is attained by embracing one's Christian identity—as a frail human being created to perfect one's freedom in love. Faith must befriend human frailty so that the divine presence can be experienced.[55]

Ironic Christic imagination facilitates the understanding and reconciling of the paradoxical characteristics of faith and Christian life as a whole. The study of the Christian faith hopefully leads the students towards growth in authentic faith and Christian living. They come to realize that faith is certain yet obscure; free yet morally obliging; reasonable yet beyond natural reason; an act yet a process; a divine gift yet a human act; and personal yet ecclesial. These seemingly opposed qualities have to be brought together for an adequate and profound understanding and response of faith (cf. *NCDP* 202). Ironic Christic imagination will overcome a one-sided, reductionist, uni-dimensional, and impoverished understanding. Each

54 Bednar, *Faith as Imagination*, 83.

55 Ibid., 84.

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dimension of faith will not be dangerously absolutized while ignoring its other essential aspects. Absolutizing an aspect of the faith is a form of reductionism which can be overcome by affirming the paradoxical characteristics of faith.

To the extent that Christians strive to see the world through the new light of ironic Christic imagination, can they bring the light of faith to bear on the world so that it can see, touch, and experience salvation through the grace of God.[56] If, according to Lynch, imagination involves all the human faculties and resources - and not only one's capacity of seeing and hearing and touching but also one's history, education, feelings, wishes, love - then imagination needs to be Christified so its way of seeing the world could be transformed.

Conclusion

Imagination can be used to teach the Christian doctrine imparted in an organic and systematic way to lead the students towards the fullness of Christian life. Beyond mere memorization, the essential truths of the Christian faith must be communicated, not as a bare skeletal outline of dead formulas, but in sufficiently complete yet simple, attractive, and captivating terms. Thus, doctrines must be incarnated in the lives of the students.[57] Kieran Scott, a theology and religious education professor, claims that when imagination is not evoked, doctrine becomes ossified, witness, and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolation hollow and ethics legalistic.[58]

56 Bednar, *Faith as Imagination,* 99.

57 Roche, "Imagination and Integration in the *NCDP* and *CFC*," 64.

58 Kieran Scott, "Tradition and Imagination in Interplay," *Religious Education,* 110, no. 3, 263, https://doi.10.1080/00344087.2015.1039363.

Teaching the faith that evokes the imagination of the students transforms the articulation of the Christian doctrine from mere head knowledge to faith touching the lives of people. With imagination, teaching the faith would be like a sailor who visits many ports and understands how one port relates geographically to another. When imagination is employed in the teaching of the faith, faith will be like viewing the tapestry of Christian doctrine, as it were from the right side of the cloth where connections can be deciphered, and the beauty of the design is appreciated. Imagination can view the correct side of the tapestry, or the artful side that brings threads together in a new and meaningful fashion. We can apply the insights of Newman, Schneiders, and Lynch in the form of three principles:

The first principle is the "loving knowledge principle" which presents faith as real knowledge born out of love and understands Christian doctrine as the mystery of God's self-revelation. This principle is inspired by Newman's religious imagination, which, when awakened and enkindled, renders faith truly personal and existential.[59] Second is the "reality principle" which emphasizes that the teaching of doctrine must have its proper grounding in Scripture, Church teaching, and human experience. This principle is based on Schneider's paschal imagination with which Christian doctrine is understood as dynamic, living, and ever evolving through God's loving wisdom at work in the ongoing salvation history. Schneiders's paschal imagination addresses the problem of irrelevant faith by highlighting the paschal mystery as the lens that integrates Christian doctrines.

Third is the "integration principle" which relates to Lynch's ironic Christic imagination. Ironic Christic imagination pulls

59 Gallagher, "Karl Rahner: The Magnetism of Mystery," 16..

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together seemingly contradictory realities of Christian life beginning from the paradoxes of faith. Integration is the key element that brings together in harmony the musical point and counterpoint that composes a single "melodious symphony of truth" (CCC, ii). Lynch describes ironic Christic imagination as a distinctive paradigm or patterning of facts and a re-composing in which reality is seen within the creative presence of a contrary. Life comes through death, strength through weakness, exaltation through humility, and fullness through emptiness.[60] Lynch's ironic Christic imagination responds to the problem of fragmented faith through a dynamic integration of paradoxes.

Teaching faith with imagination harnesses the human capacity to relate the deep realities of faith to our daily experience. The use of imagination in teaching responds to young people's deepest questions and shows the inspiring, life-giving, and transforming gift of the Christian faith. The use of imagination in religious education is essentially related to integration because imagination is the contact point between the spiritual realities of faith and the human capacity for God (cf. CCC, 27-49).

60 Bednar, *Faith as Imagination,* 82-83..