

SIMPLE IS NOT SIMPLISTIC

By Susan Vogt, ©1997

For the umpteenth time I had just seen someone I should know and couldn't remember their name. It wasn't that I didn't know the name; it's just that I'm finding it takes longer and longer to pull it out of memory and by then the friend may be gone. I feel like a 486 computer in a Pentium world. I need a memory upgrade!

As I thought about my memory lapses, I started to think about other areas of life that might need an upgrade. The one that occurs to me frequently in my work is that of faith development and spirituality. For example, in my husband's and my work in marriage preparation ministry I am sometimes saddened to come across couples who are very sophisticated in their career or academic accomplishments but are still operating out of a grade school level of faith awareness.

Now I don't mean that one has to take years of theology in order to be a good Christian. Certainly, faith is not dependent on schooling or else many illiterate, but holy men and women of previous generations would have to be discounted. Similarly, some of the most faith filled people I know have deepened their relationship with God to a point where it has become very "simple". They understand the heart of what is really important in life and live it. But "simple" is not to be confused with "simplistic". Simple is deep, thoughtful, and respectful. Simplistic is superficial and often critical of others. Becoming simple can take a lot of work and is not always easy.

What disturbs me is that while many of our Catholic population are becoming more highly educated and competent in their careers, they often don't give comparable energy and priority to their relationship with God. What we suggest to engaged couples, for instance, is that whatever level of sophistication they reach in their work, they should strive to match that in their faith. This doesn't mean a medical doctor needs to have a doctorate in theology, but it does mean she or he should read and enter into enrichment opportunities on a commensurate level of sophistication. Likewise, personal prayer is likely to move beyond *only* the memorized, or "follow-the-leader" prayers of childhood.

You might ask, "Why bother?" The risk for those who don't upgrade is that when they face the difficult and thorny issues of adult life, they are often stuck in a childhood, black and white moral or religious mentality. They may not have a fully educated conscience and may make moral decisions based on simplistic notions or what everyone around them is doing. They may think they know when they don't.

For instance, a divorced person leaving a seriously destructive marriage may wrongly think that an annulment means that his/her children are illegitimate. A woman living with the guilt and agony of having had an abortion may feel her sin is unforgivable. The self-righteous may feel they are just fine because they go to church often and keep all the rules, when the spirit of how they treat their neighbors and the environment is in conflict with the spirit of the gospels.

Another hazard that I've seen with some people my own age is that they left the institutional Church years ago, perhaps over a marriage or baptism insensitively handled, perhaps a disenchantment with uninspiring liturgies or injustices and imperfections within the Church, or perhaps just because of being busy with other things. Regardless of the validity of some of the initial reasons for opting out, many of these folks have an outdated memory of the Church and criticize things that are no longer true or have been rectified in many parishes. An update is worth a try.

So, if getting another degree is not the answer, what's doable for most people? Many parishes have excellent R.C.I.A. programs which offer the most up to date understanding of the sacraments, liturgy, community, and faith. Isn't it ironic that many converts are more current with their faith than some cradle Catholics. Of course there is always the option of reading some solid and challenging works by our bishops, modern theologians, and spiritual guides. Taking it all to God in prayer couldn't hurt either. This is just a start. Contact me if you want more ideas. I'm upgrading.