



Understanding  
Catholic  
Christianity



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Nihil Obstat: Rev. William M. Becker, STD  
Censor Librorum  
1 July 1996

Imprimatur: †Most Rev. John G. Vlazny, DD  
Bishop of Winona  
1 July 1996

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The publishing team included Michael Wilt, development editor; Shirley Kelter, Stephan Nagel, and Robert Smith, FSC, consulting editors; Peter C. Phan, consultant; Rebecca Fairbank, copy editor; Gary J. Boisvert, production editor, page designer, and typesetter; Maurine R. Twait, art director; Penny Koehler and Kent Linder, photo researchers; Michael O. McGrath, artist; and Alan M. Greenberg, Integrity Indexing, indexer.

The passage on the title page is from C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, anniversary edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1981), pages 150–151, 191. Copyright © 1943, 1945, 1952 by Macmillan Publishing Company.

The acknowledgments continue on page 334.

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Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Year: 2005 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97

ISBN 0-88489-372-3

Saint Mary's Press

# Understanding Catholic Christianity

If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire  
if you want to be wet you must get into the water.  
If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life,  
you must get close to, or even into,  
the thing that has them.

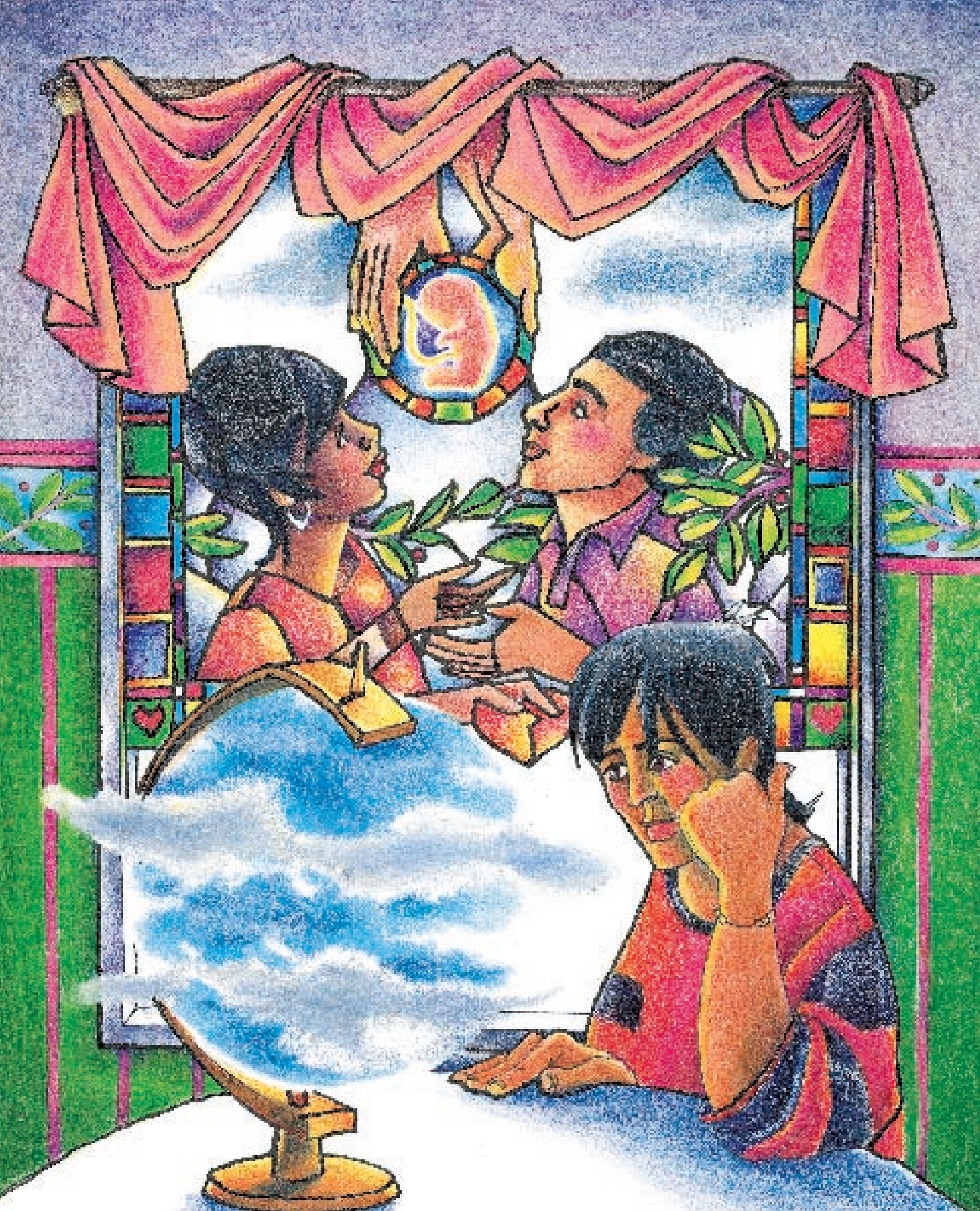
They are not a sort of prize which God could  
if He chose, just hand out to anyone.  
They are a great fountain of energy and beauty  
spurting up at the very centre of reality. . . .

Look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him  
everything else thrown in.

**Thomas Zanzig and Barbara Allaire**

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# 1

## Identity and Development: *Becoming Who You Are Called to Be*

### Unique in All the World

Fifteen years ago, about four and a half billion people lived on this global village we call earth. Men, women, boys, girls—four and a half billion human beings with dreams, fears, loves, hates, hang-ups, and hopes. Those billions of people do not include all the human beings who lived on this earth throughout human history and for the thousands of years before history was recorded.

More than fifteen years ago, two of those billions of people, each with her or his own special history, crossed paths on a particular day and at a particular place. Out of all the people in the world, they were drawn together. This man and this woman began a relationship and a history unique to them. Against the backdrop of their shared history, they celebrated their union of spirits by becoming one in body as well.

When that man and that woman joined in sexual intercourse, literally millions of possibilities were present. In one act of sexual intercourse, the man shared millions of sperm cells with the woman—any one of which might have united with one of her hundreds of eggs, or all of which might have died after a short time. Yet one of those sperm cells survived—one unique from all the others in its potential and its characteristics. That one sperm cell united with one of the woman's equally unique eggs, and the miracle of human creation began.

### In This Chapter . . .

**Unique in All the World**  
The Journey of Your Life  
This Course and Your Journey  
A Question at the Heart  
of the Journey  
Your "Gifts and Givens"

**Adolescence: Journeying from  
Childhood to Adulthood**  
Scenes from the Journey  
Dramatic Changes at Every Level  
of Life  
We Are More Than Our Body  
Crucial Tasks of Adolescence  
Full of Longings

**Finding Answers to Life's Longings**  
Society's "Answers"  
The Need to Be Critical  
New Questions

**Our Heart Is Restless**

**1** Have you been told about your origins—about how your parents met, the circumstances of your coming into the world, the day or night you were born? If you were adopted and do not know about your biological parents, have you been told about the day you came to live with your family? Write about any stories you have been told.



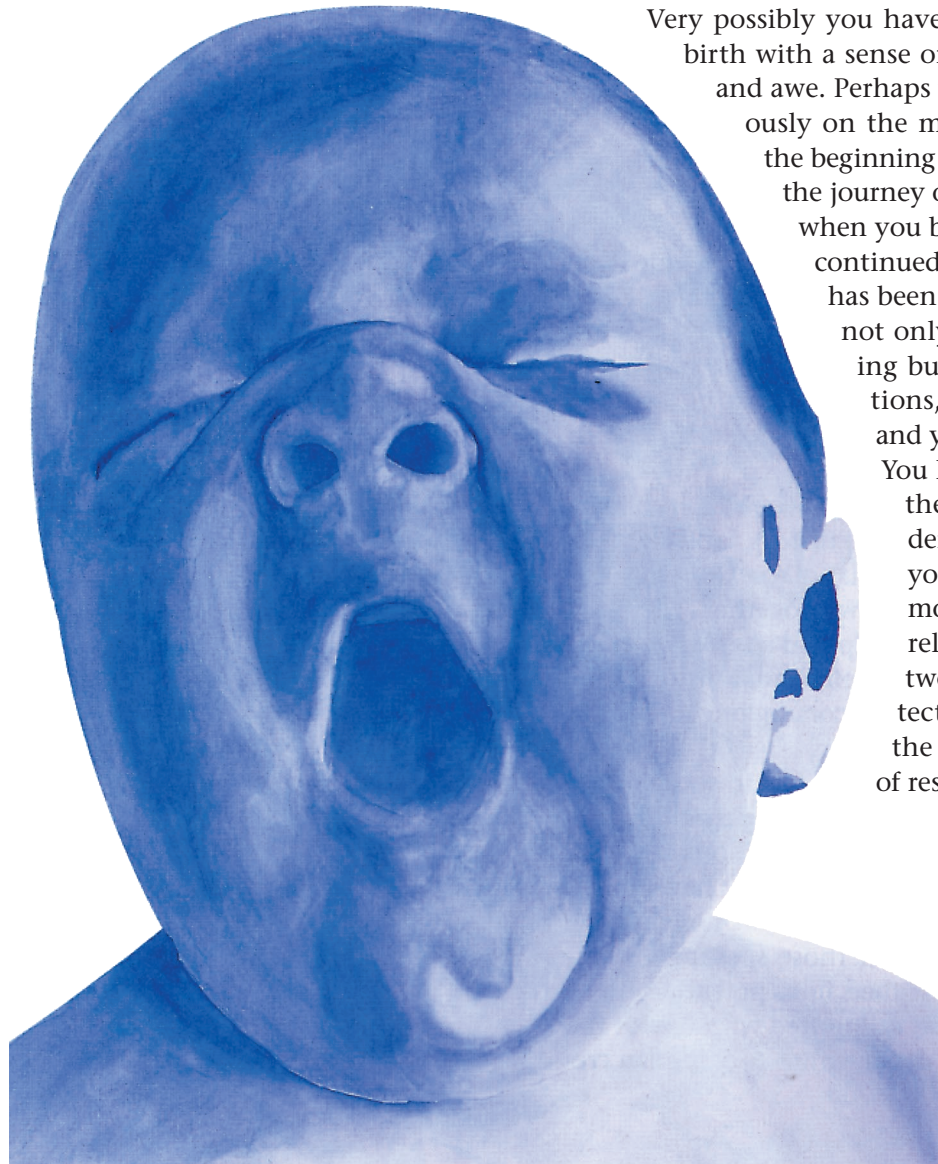
Nine months or so later, a new human being entered the world—a new human being that shared many of the characteristics of the billions who came before it. Yet this person was distinct, different, unique. Never before had the world seen anyone exactly like this human being. Never before had this special combination of genes and chromosomes, this combination of blood and bone, this wonderful potential of talent and gift, been born. Never again in the future of the world would that miracle be precisely repeated.

That indescribable mystery of some fourteen years ago, that nearly unimaginable wonder, that never-to-be-repeated moment, was the birth of someone very special—you.

### The Journey of Your Life

Very possibly you have never thought of your own birth with a sense of drama or a sense of wonder and awe. Perhaps you have never reflected seriously on the miracle of birth as being only the beginning of an equally amazing story—the journey of your life. Since the moment when you burst into the world, you have continued the process of growth. And it has been a total process, during which not only your body has been changing but also your mind, your emotions, your attitudes, your values, and your relationships with others. You have continued, for example, the often difficult process of defining that relationship with your parents that began in your mother's womb. Included in this relationship is the conflict between wanting and needing protection and affection while, at the same time, kicking to be free of restrictions.

**Each human being comes into the world distinct, different, unique.**  
*Student art: "Little Boy Blue," watercolor painting by David Christianson, Sacred Heart High School, Kingston, Massachusetts*



Outside the family you have also been confronted through the years with new experiences, new challenges, new feelings. Many ideas you accepted unquestioningly before, you may now either reject or seriously challenge. Perhaps life has not been easy for you. And as you enter adulthood, life will not soon get easier. Yet like all the great journeys we learn of in history and literature, it is precisely the challenges, the dangers, and even the pain that make the journey of life such a grand adventure.

### This Course and Your Journey

As you grow through adolescence, a significant part of your journey will be to look at the deeper meaning of life, to wrestle honestly with questions you probably never thought about or took for granted when you were younger.

Perhaps you were raised in a family that faithfully practiced Catholicism. You learned certain prayers and religious customs; you attended Mass with your family and made your first Communion. Maybe you went to a Catholic grade school or a parish religious education program, where you learned about the sacraments and beliefs of the church. You may not have had a lot of questions about religion because you just accepted what you were taught.

However, the understandings you had about God and your religion from childhood were likely quite limited—probably a mixed bag of some truth, some confused notions, some genuine understanding, and perhaps some humorous misunderstandings. Mixed-up religious ideas you might carry from childhood are not necessarily the fault of your parents or religious educators but simply the result of your

**2** Find four photos of yourself, one taken recently and three from younger ages. For the "you" in each photo, describe in writing a memory you have (or have been told) that expresses what you were like at each age.



**3** If you are Catholic and have celebrated your first Communion, try to locate a photo of yourself on that occasion. Recall what you felt on that day. Then write a paragraph comparing your attitude toward religion at the time of your first Communion with what you feel about it now.



4

Recall images of God or religious beliefs held by young children that now seem humorous to you. Draw upon your own childhood as well as that of other children you know. Briefly describe a couple of these humorous images in writing.



being too young then to understand the deeper issues of faith as adolescents and adults can.

Simple answers are all right for little kids, but they will not be accepted by teenagers, who need and deserve the chance to go deeper. Adolescence is the time in one's life journey when the old childhood notions of God and religion can be examined, and the questions and struggles about faith that never seemed to crop up in childhood can be wrestled with. If you have been brought up in the Catholic tradition, this course can serve that purpose for you, helping you gradually replace childhood knowledge with a more mature understanding of your faith.

Possibly you were baptized and raised Catholic, but you are at a point of uncertainty about this faith, and you question everything—the church's teachings and practices, or even the very existence of God. Know that your questions, offered in a spirit of openness and sincerity, are welcome in this course. A sincere search for truth, guided by God's grace, ultimately will lead to truth.



You may not have been raised Catholic, but because you are attending Catholic high school, you may be required to take this course. May this course be an opportunity for you to learn, in a mature and open way, about the faith tradition of the school you and your family have chosen for you. This course has been designed with awareness of, and respect for, other religious traditions. It is not the intent of this course to convert non-Catholic students to Catholicism, but to give everyone, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the chance at least to understand what the Catholic heritage is all about.

### A Question at the Heart of the Journey

A fundamental question related to the Catholic heritage you are about to study has to do with our very existence. Have you ever wondered, "Why am I here at all?" Why are you, in all your uniqueness, living on earth anyway? Let's look briefly at two distinct answers.

#### Just an Accident

One way to answer that question is to say, "Look, there's no mystery about it. I was just the product of a random series of events and coincidences, including that this one particular sperm happened to get together with this one particular egg. So here I am. No big deal. It was sort of an accident that I happened at all."

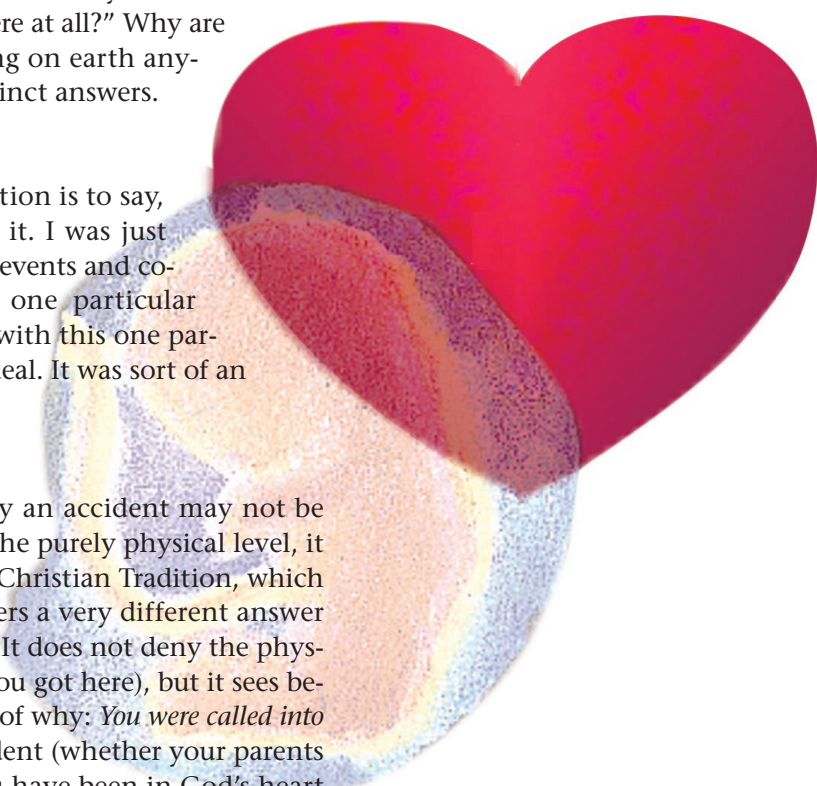
#### Called into Being by God

The answer that life is merely an accident may not be very satisfying, but at one level, the purely physical level, it is correct. However, the Catholic Christian Tradition, which you will study in this course, offers a very different answer to the question of why you exist. It does not deny the physical explanation of things (how you got here), but it sees beyond that to a much deeper kind of why: *You were called into being by God*. You are not an accident (whether your parents planned to have you or not)! You have been in God's heart from all eternity, until God called you into existence some fifteen years ago when you were conceived in your mother's womb. God called you into existence out of love for you, and God longs for your love in return. You were created to live in union with God in this life and forever, even beyond death.

And that is the awesome, mysterious reason you are here.

5

In a one-page essay, answer this question: *Why are you taking this course, and how do you feel about it?*



What are the gifts and givens in your life? In a paragraph, summarize what has been given to you as part of your heritage or background.



## Your "Gifts and Givens"

Yes, you were born with a unique set of chromosomes, which determines a lot about your body and even your intellect and emotions. And you were situated in a particular family, neighborhood, race, culture, religion, and economic class. You have certain talents and opportunities, as well as certain struggles and limitations, because of your background. These are the "gifts and givens" of your life—things you did not choose or do not have control over. They are the "raw materials" you have to work with, to become who God is calling you to be.

Your **identity** is what you have become at any point in time as a result of choosing what to do with what you have been given. God created you knowing that you would have some special gifts to share with the world, something that no one else in all of history could offer because no other human being is just like you. Life is a journey of gradually discovering unique gifts one has to offer, embracing them, developing them, and sharing them with others.

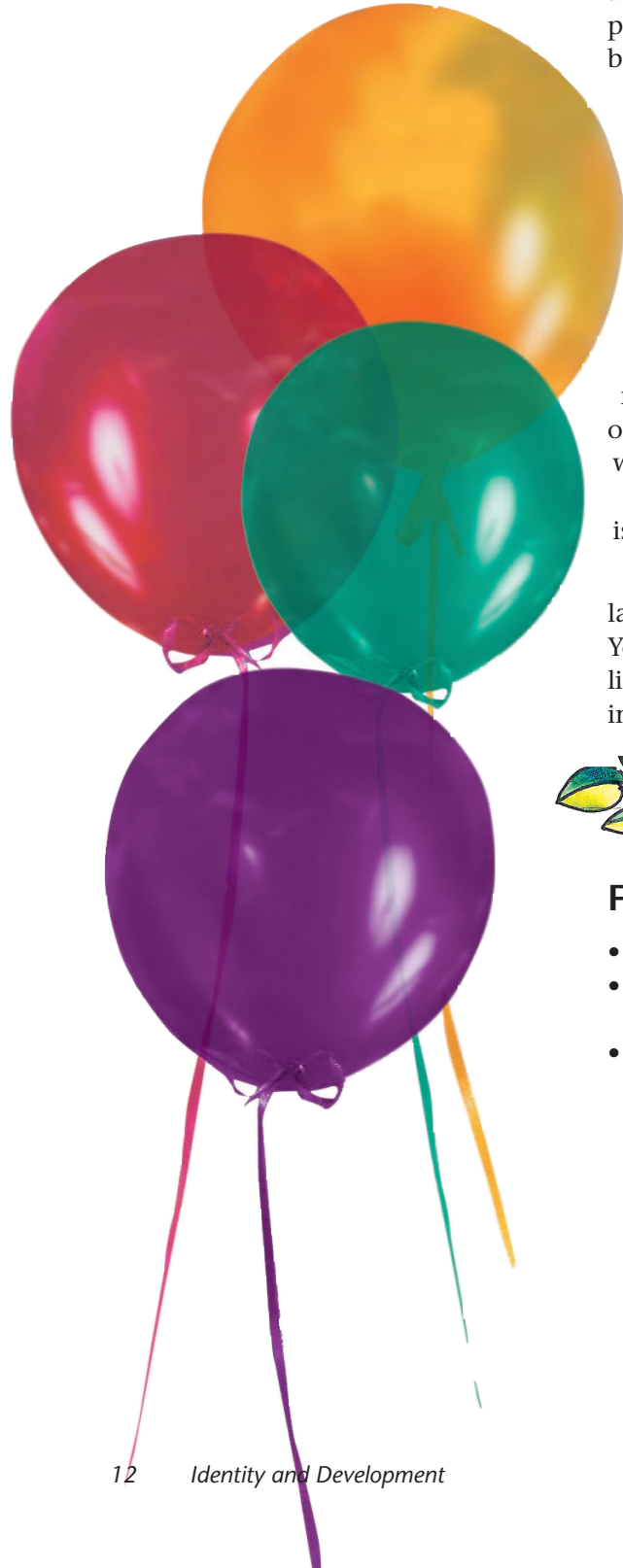
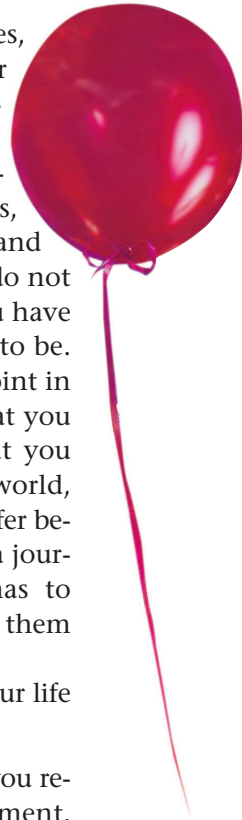
Your life is God's gift to you. What you do with your life is your gift to God.

To begin our study of the Catholic faith and how you relate to it, let's look at where you are in your development. You are in the period of adolescence, the crucial years in a life's journey when a person moves from being a child to being an adult.



## For Review

- What is the intent of this course?
- According to the Catholic Christian vision, why are you here on earth?
- What are the types of givens that are part of everyone's life? How do they relate to what God is calling each person to be?



## The "If Only" Test

CONSIDER for a few minutes the many things in your life over which you have had little or no control. For example, you did not choose to be born. The initial choice of beginning your life was the decision of your parents, or in an even more profound sense, your life was a gift from God. Similarly, you could not control which historical period you were born in, or your country of birth, your ethnic background, your family, or your social and economic background.

This list could be longer, but the point is clear. Much of who we are is beyond our control. For better or worse, that is just the way life is. But the sad fact is that most of us spend a great deal of time and effort regretting this reality, denying it to ourselves, and trying to escape it. We would be much happier if we could accept the givens in our life.


Here is a simple test of our acceptance of the conditions we encounter as givens. Try to recall the last time you started a sentence with the words *if only*. Also try to remember when you heard friends, relatives, or others use that expression. A few examples might help to jog your memory.

- If only I could be better looking . . .
- If only I could have more money . . .

- If only he or she would like me . . .
- If only I were smarter . . .
- If only I had different parents . . .
- If only I had a nicer home . . .
- If only I had teachers that were more understanding . . .

Too often we live in a world of "if onlys." We look back at our past with regret or anger. Or we look ahead to our future with fear or lack of hope. The problem, of course, is that we overlook the possibilities of the present—the here and now. Unfortunately someday we will recall these moments we have wasted, these great opportunities for growth we have missed, and we will say, "If only I had done that differently."

One way to try to get control of our "if onlys" is to reflect on the Serenity Prayer. This popular prayer conveys a deep sense of peace and inspires us to be true to ourselves and all that we have been given in life.

God, grant me  
serenity  
to accept those things that I cannot change,  
courage  
to change those things that I can,  
and wisdom  
to know the difference. 





## Adolescence: Journeying from Childhood to Adulthood

If you have ever moved from one city, state, or country to another, you know how difficult and even depressing it can be to leave behind everything familiar and try to fit into what feels like a totally new world. Yet despite the trials of moving, you may often find great adventures and possibilities in the new place.

In adolescence, as with a geographical move, you are leaving the comfort and security of one stage of human life to venture into the unknown of another stage. This change can be frightening, confusing, and lonely. Yet, like moving from one city to another, it can also be exciting and hope filled.

At few other times in your life will things happen so quickly, yet so deeply; rarely will you need to adjust to so many changes in so short a time. This is one of the reasons most people look back on their high school years as among the most memorable in their life—even though not all the memories are pleasant.

Experts in human development disagree as to the exact definition of adolescence. For our purposes in this course, however, **adolescence** begins with the physical event of **puberty**, which results in our being capable of reproducing sexually. Adolescence ends with our gaining social status as an adult at about the age of twenty. The years in between are a fascinating journey.

### Scenes from the Journey

Here are “scenes” from the lives of some ninth graders—people in the early stages of the journey from childhood to adulthood, which is adolescence. See if you can identify with any of these young people:

#### Josh

Josh spends a fair amount of time in front of the mirror, checking out his body and seeing how everything is developing. He is mostly concerned about the size of his body; he is one of those guys who hasn't hit his peak growth yet. He is four feet eleven, 110 pounds, and embarrassed to death about it. He flexes his muscles and makes up his mind—again—that he needs to get some bodybuilding equipment right away.

#### Shawn

Shawn is already six feet, 170 pounds, and has the varsity basketball coach dreaming of a trophy once he gets this kid on his team. Shawn, though, is quite self-conscious because he is often clumsy and hasn't learned to coordinate his rapidly growing body.

#### Jenny

Jenny is attracted to older guys—eleventh graders. She figures they'll like her if she looks good to them, so she also goes to the mirror often to check things out. She's likely to say “Yuck!” when she sees herself, though, because she knows she'll never look like those incredibly thin, beautiful models on TV and in magazines, who have perfect figures, fantastic clothes, flawless skin and hair.

#### Angela

Angela finds life a lot harder than it used to be. She feels sad more often. She loves being with her friends, laughing and talking for hours at a time, yet at times she feels lonely, close to tears, and wonders why. She gets depressed about how messed up the world is and how nobody seems to care. She just can't see why terrible things go on, like that little boy getting killed in a shooting two blocks from her house. How can there be a God if such awful stuff happens?

#### Anthony

Anthony hears a lot about sex from older guys who brag about all the girls they've had. Their bragging just seems funny and kind of weird. Now Anthony's feeling really attracted to one particular girl, and he wonders, “What's supposed to happen? Do I just go out with this girl and we suddenly have sex, or what?” Anthony is nervous and shy about even talking to her, let alone thinking about whether they're supposed to end up in bed.

#### Carlos

Carlos remembers when his family was real close, about four years ago, before they came to the States. In Mexico, they were poor and had a hard time getting by. But, at least they laughed a lot, hugged one another, and talked to one another freely. Now things are different; Carlos's parents don't like anything he's into—his friends, how he dresses, the music he listens to, where he hangs out, what time he comes in. They're so afraid he's getting into trouble. And lately he finds himself disagreeing with all their ideas about life, religion, God—everything important. To keep things peaceful, Carlos decides to be quiet about his life and his

7 Do boys experience the same social pressure as girls to measure up to certain physical standards of attractiveness? Explain briefly in writing.



8 Based on current magazine and TV ads, describe in writing what is considered attractive nowadays in women's looks. Then answer this question: *How are most teenage girls likely to feel about themselves when compared with this standard?*



In adolescence, you are venturing on a journey to adulthood.

Student art: “Passage to Beyond,” color photo by Martin Rodriguez, Saint Anthony Catholic High School, San Antonio, Texas





9

Write down five suggestions for parents on how they might respond positively to the growing independent thinking, or intellectual independence, of their adolescent children.



thoughts around his parents; it's better to withdraw from them than have a big scene over every little thing. But of course then his parents get more suspicious!

**Lisa**

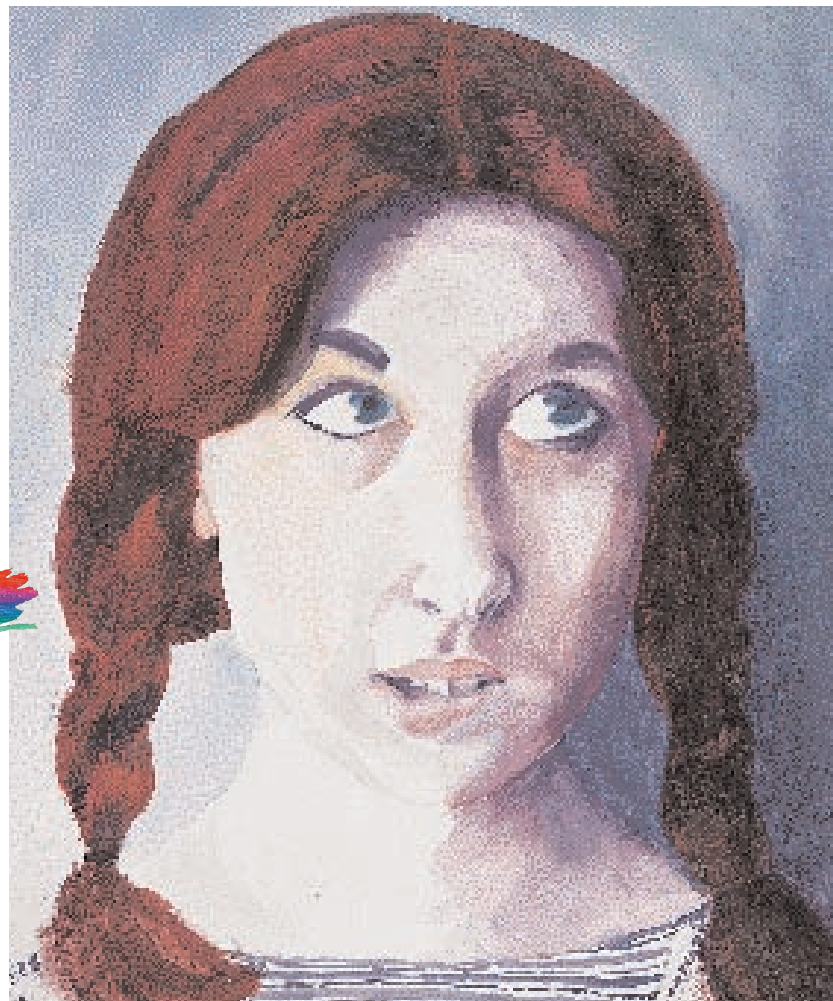
Lisa is physically mature for her age, and very attractive. Lots of older guys are calling her. She's mad because her mother says she can't date until she is seventeen. The guys keep calling anyway, and she feels silly having to tell them she can't go out with them for two more years! Once in a while, though, she wonders what these guys are really looking for. Do they really like *her*, do they even care what she's like as a *person*? Or do they just see her as a great body and nothing more?

**Dianna**

Dianna has always been smart, but it never seemed to be a problem until this year. Now when she aces a test or knows how to solve a really hard problem in algebra class, she figures she'd better not let anyone know. The guys will be threatened, the girls will be jealous, and nobody will want to talk to her. If she acts dumb, they'll like her. But it bothers Dianna to have to disguise her own abilities.

10

Explain, in writing, whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: *Boys tend to treat girls as sex objects, but girls do not tend to treat boys as sex objects.*



Adolescence can be an anxious but also an exciting time. Student art: "Cora," watercolor painting by Emmy Murray, Sacred Heart High School, Kingston, Massachusetts

**Dramatic Changes at Every Level of Life**

Most ninth graders, like those just described, are changing dramatically on all levels of life—**physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually**. But even though we can talk about these levels separately, we do not experience them that way. They are all mixed up together in a person's life, and in adolescence they make a pretty powerful combination!

For example, many of the emotional changes you may be encountering are directly related to physical changes you are undergoing. Likewise, your attitudes toward faith and religion may be changing as a result of your increasing intellectual ability—your power to think about difficult concepts and philosophical issues. You are a whole person, not a bunch of separate pieces glued together.

You may have been able to identify with certain of the eight young people introduced above—or maybe not. Perhaps none of them fits your life and the dilemmas you face. That is because no small group of people could ever represent the variety of struggles that people your age have. For one thing, puberty begins at different ages for people. Traditionally it has been considered to begin about age twelve for girls and age fourteen for boys. Actually it starts as early as age nine or ten for some people and as late as fifteen or sixteen for others. Any group of ninth graders will vary enormously just because they begin puberty at different times. But even for those on the same "time schedule," their individual journeys are unique.

**We Are More Than Our Body**

Because the physical changes of puberty are so noticeable and dramatic, we may not be as aware of the changes we are going through at all the other levels—emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual. In early adolescence it sometimes seems that our body is *everything* about us. But we need to get a sense of perspective about how central our body is, with its particular traits, to who we really are as a person.

Media advertising tries to convince teenagers that having a fabulous body is *everything*—the most important thing about who a person is.




## Overcoming Obstacles

**J**OHN Hockenberry, then age nineteen, and a friend were hitchhiking home from college in 1976. They were picked up by two young women on a similar trip. Fatigued, the driver fell asleep at the wheel. In the ensuing crash, she was killed, and Hockenberry was seriously injured. He became paralyzed from the middle of the chest down. Nearly twenty years later, he wrote:

Sometimes in my wheelchair I achieve a moment of unity between the chair, the arms that push it, and the mind that observes it all, when I feel like a character on horseback in an elaborately constructed Tolstoy or Dickens novel. Riding over a landscape that seems to be endless and always arriving somewhere new and wonderful, I can't help but believe that if I had not insisted on hitchhiking along a road in Pennsylvania back in February 1976, I would have missed the moment of my accident. The thought always produces a harrowing twinge, as though it was a close call, a cliffhanger rather than a fact. I might have missed what my life has become, each subsequent event locked to the preceding

one like the sequential rhythm of a horse's hooves. (*Moving Violations*, page 69)

What did Hockenberry's life become? He is a popular, respected, and award-winning radio and TV reporter, covering news from Washington, D.C., to Iraqi war zones. Hockenberry's damaged body limited him in some ways, but it also gave rise to his determination to overcome whatever obstacles he encountered. His rich and satisfying life demonstrates the principle that although our body defines us in some ways, we are much more than our body. Every one of us has physical limitations; it is up to us to allow our true skills, talents, and beauties to thrive regardless of those limits, and sometimes even because of them. 



### More or Less Body Equals More or Less Me?

Buckminster Fuller, one of the creative geniuses of modern times, once reflected on his body and his attitude toward it. He remembered that he had come into the world weighing only 7 pounds, the sum total of all he was. Eventually he grew to be 70 pounds, then 170, then over 200. During that time he ate literally tons of food, some of which became hair that was cut off in regular trips to the barber.

Then he dieted and lost 70 pounds. After all that, he asked himself: "Just who am I anyway? Who was the 70 pounds lost through dieting? Am I less myself after that? Was I more or less myself before or after the haircut?" Fuller realized that his body could weigh 70 pounds less, yet he could feel more fully himself at the lighter weight.

Finally Fuller not only knew but understood in a deep sense a fact we so often miss in our society: We are more than our body. Besides a body, we have intelligence—the incredible ability to seek out and grasp truth. We also have emotions—the tremendous gift of our feelings and the ability to identify with the feelings of others. We dream. We interact socially. We reach out to one another in love. We create. And we can do all these things regardless of the shape of our body. In fact, the traits that make us truly human—creatures unique among all forms of life—are not dependent on our physical appearance.

### Caring for Our Body, with All Its Limits

We must judge our own loveliness by more than what we see in the mirror. We must measure our value as human beings by more than the strength or shape of our body. Obviously our body is important. It affects what we physically can and cannot do. We must exercise, keep in shape, and avoid faddish diets and bad habits that can harm us. Our body is our primary contact with the rest of the world, the vehicle through which all our values and talents are expressed. So we should take care of ourselves but not lose sight of what is most important—that our true beauty will show through our body regardless of its limitations. And indeed our physical limitations often help us discover and reveal our true beauty.

### Made in the Image of God

The Bible's Book of Genesis, which contains stories about our origins that are sacred to Christians and Jews, tells us that we are **made in the image and likeness of God**:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image. . . ."

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

(1:26–27)

What makes us human is something more than our body. We are images, or reflections, of God, who is pure spirit. Yes, we are our body, but also so much more than that.

**11** Write about some change each of the young people described in the text is going through at either the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, or spiritual level. Then compare those changes with what you are going through at each of those levels.



**12** List five improvements you could make in the way you care for your body.



13

Before reading ahead, make a list of the important characteristics of a good friendship, especially those you have learned from personal experience. Then compare your list with the one on page 23, and see if you want to add to your list. Rank each item on your list, with 1 being the most important characteristic.



### Are We Related?

Being made in God's image, we are also relational. God is a community of three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—commonly referred to as the Trinity. Similarly, we exist in community with others. We will learn more about the Trinity later in this course. At this point it is enough to emphasize that just as it is God's nature to be in relationship, in community, so it is our nature to be related to others in community—other human beings and all of creation! Our social nature is a reflection of God.

### Crucial Tasks of Adolescence

This course cannot deal with *all* the changes that happen as a natural part of adolescence. However, some changes in this period do not simply happen automatically; they must be accomplished. Psychologists call these the **developmental tasks of adolescence**—tasks that are required of young people if they are to move effectively from adolescence to mature adulthood. Among these tasks three stand out as most important:

#### 1. The development of a capacity for friendship.

One of the most significant tasks of adolescence is the development of a capacity for friendship. In studies about the needs and concerns of young people, one of the most consistent and highly rated desires of young people is to learn how to make friends and how to be a good friend.

Adolescents' deepening capacity for friendship is at the heart of their growth to adulthood. Two other tasks of adolescence, described below—forming a healthy sexual identity and developing a mature relationship with parents—are related to friendship. A good, healthy sexual relationship, the kind that characterizes a marriage, is above all a deep friendship. And the parent-child relationship needs to develop from total dependency of the child on the parents to a more equal, sharing style of relating as adults—a friendship. Now, during this pivotal period in your development, is a good time to consider the qualities and skills of friendship, so as to discover ways to grow in your own ability to nurture friendships in your life.

**2. The development of a healthy sexual identity.** A person must develop a strong enough sense of self to be able to relate sexually with others in ways that are positive, life affirming,



caring, and responsible. This will involve acceptance of one's own body as well as respect for the bodies of others. Sexual maturity involves far more than our body, however. Also involved are emotional maturity, communication skills, a capacity for developing trust in one's relationships, the ability to care deeply without trying to possess or control the other, and much more.

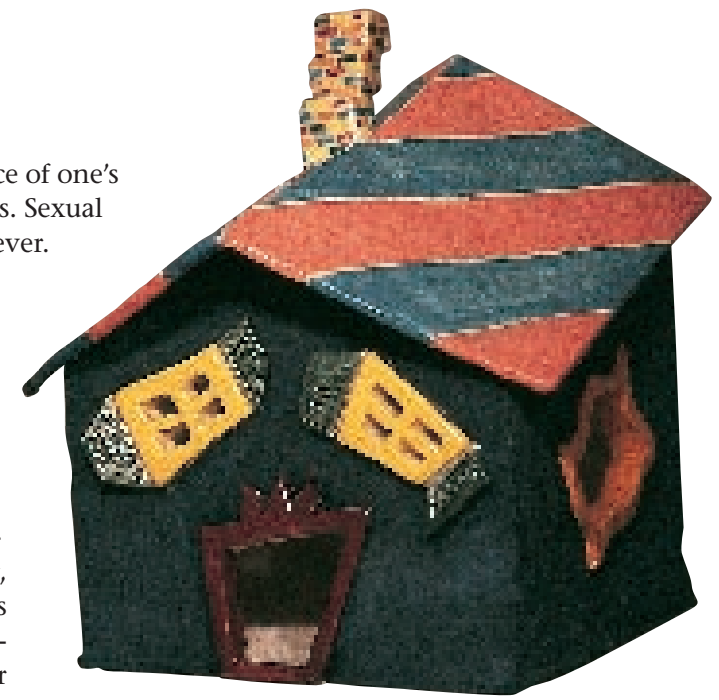
**3. The development of a more mature parent-child relationship.** Young children depend on their parents for virtually everything required for survival—food, clothing, shelter, affection, and so on. As children grow older, this dependent relationship tends to change, as they assume more and more personal responsibility for their life. Unfortunately parents and their children are often very clumsy in the way they handle this transition. They frequently step on one another's emotional toes as they work toward a new adult relationship. Young people value freedom; parents value security for their children. Far too often parents and children who care deeply for one another go through a painful wounding break in their relationship. A little understanding of what is taking place could reduce, if not eliminate, much of the tension involved.

### Full of Longings

Adolescence is full of excitement and promise—for friendship at a deeper level, for growing independence, for discovering oneself as a sexual person. Those same possibilities contain hazards, but for most young people the sense of promise outweighs the sense of danger.

With all those good, exciting developments happening or soon to happen in your life, though, the truth is (and you have no doubt already felt this) that this time is also full of longings and downright pain. Such longings are brought on by losses of all kinds—a friendship that ends, the divorce of one's parents, an unmet goal. We experience loss and longing when friends or relatives are damaged by alcoholism, drug addiction, or disease. When we lose our innocence about the way the world works, and find that all is not as pure and simple as we imagined in childhood, we often long for a "simpler time." All these events can make life seem empty, hollow, disappointing.

Maybe you put all your hopes in going out with someone you are attracted to, and then the whole thing fizzles. You are crushed. Or you feel your independence from your parents rising, and you long for them to treat you like an



**Our childhood relationship of dependence on home and parents changes as we grow into more personal responsibility for our own life.**

*Student art: "Family Home," ceramic sculpture by Lane Barham, Mother McAuley High School, Chicago, Illinois*



14

Interview one or both of your parents about what their adolescence was like. Write up the interview and give it to them to read. Then ask them to interview you about what *your* adolescence is like.



adult, respecting your viewpoints and letting you be. But instead what you get are clashes with them—sharp words and ugly scenes. Or you see yourself as part of a stable family, but one day your parents announce that they are separating. Perhaps you long to be comforted by a friend when things are going bad for you, but that person just doesn't understand, even though he or she claims to. Sometimes you just ache, you feel so lonely—even when you're in a crowd of people you know, or maybe especially then. Maybe you are bored most of the time; you cannot seem to find anything worth pouring your energy into.

Another form of longing may be the endless questions you have—about life, about God or religion, about why things have to be as they are. These are questions without ready answers, and at times they may consume you with uncertainty. You long to have answers, but instead you get only more questions.

The aches and the longings for *more* that are so much a part of adolescence do not really go away as human beings get older. The longing takes different forms, but it is still there, like a huge gap in us that is waiting to be filled. We are so incomplete. That is part of the pain of human existence. We are constantly searching for happiness, looking to fill up our emptiness.



### For Review

- Using the stories of the young people described in this section, give an example of a change at each level of existence: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual.
- According to the Christian tradition, in what ways are human beings made in the image of God?
- Name the three crucial tasks of adolescence. How does the deepening capacity for friendship relate to all of them?


15

Create a piece of art or an artistic symbol that represents some loss or pain you have gone through. Then write about the ache or longing you felt, or still feel, as a result of that difficulty.



## The Qualities and Skills of Friendship

THESE brief descriptions of the qualities and skills of friendship can serve as the starting point for conversation. You may want to discuss each of these points and add others that come to mind.

- *Your best friend is yourself.* The more I like and accept who I am as a person, the more likely I am to have the courage and desire to give myself to others in friendship.
- *A friend wants the best for the other.* Although we obviously gain personally from all our friendships, our goal is to promote the happiness of others, not to use others for our own fulfillment or satisfaction.
- *Friendship takes work.* Friendship requires a commitment by the friends to nurture their relationship through both the happy times and the inevitable tough times.
- *Friends talk with their heart.* Friends share their feelings and thoughts honestly and openly. They also listen with their head and their heart to what the other person is communicating.
- *Friendship grows in the soil of trust.* Building trust takes a lot of time. We learn to trust others gradually, based on our day-to-day experiences with them. Trust is fragile, however, and can be quickly shattered. This fact leads to the next point.
- *Friends forgive.* We humans are wonderful but also weak. We all make mistakes, and we all hurt one another, most of the time without intending to. When we hurt someone, it is difficult to find the words to express sorrow and regret and to ask for forgiveness. When we have been hurt, accepting once again the risks that trust involves can be even more difficult. Friends must work at learning the skills of asking for and granting forgiveness.
- *Friends experience freedom, not fences.* Freedom relates closely to trust. When friendship exists, we do not feel trapped by the other person. A sure sign of the absence of true friendship is the presence of jealousy. If all contacts with others cause a friend to be suspicious or fearful, then friendship did not exist in the first place. This idea relates to the last point.
- *Friendship builds more friendships.* We want to share our friendships with others. Constantly wanting to be alone with a person is often a sign that the relationship is not one of friendship but of dependency. When we learn to be friends with another person, that experience gives us the skills and desire to build more friendships. 

## Finding Answers to Life's Longings

In the Catholic Christian vision, it is no accident that we are full of aches and longings, that we feel so incomplete. We were created by God with a built-in **longing for happiness**, and we will be restless until we find happiness. The ache is there for a reason, God's "reason," so that we might be moved to search for *true* happiness and ultimately find it.

Our longings, then, are not cause for despair. Rather, our emptiness can be seen as the spaciousness we need to help us discover that what truly fulfills us also fulfills God's desire for us. Unfortunately North American society does not often see our longings in this light; instead, it offers many shortcuts to happiness.

### Society's "Answers"

When we speak of our society's "answers" to the needs raised by our longings, it is good to recall that we are social creatures. We need society, and in fact we *are* society. All of us play a part in the development of society's answers. So when we examine society, we also examine our own part in society.



The Western society we live in provides us with some ready-made answers to what will make us happy. In many cases society points us in some good, worthwhile directions, such as "Stay in school" or "Learn to express yourself." But too many of the answers and values we get from society point us to illusions of happiness, not the real thing. Let's take a look at some of these values, the recommended habits and assumptions about life that society offers us as the way to fulfillment.

### Popularity

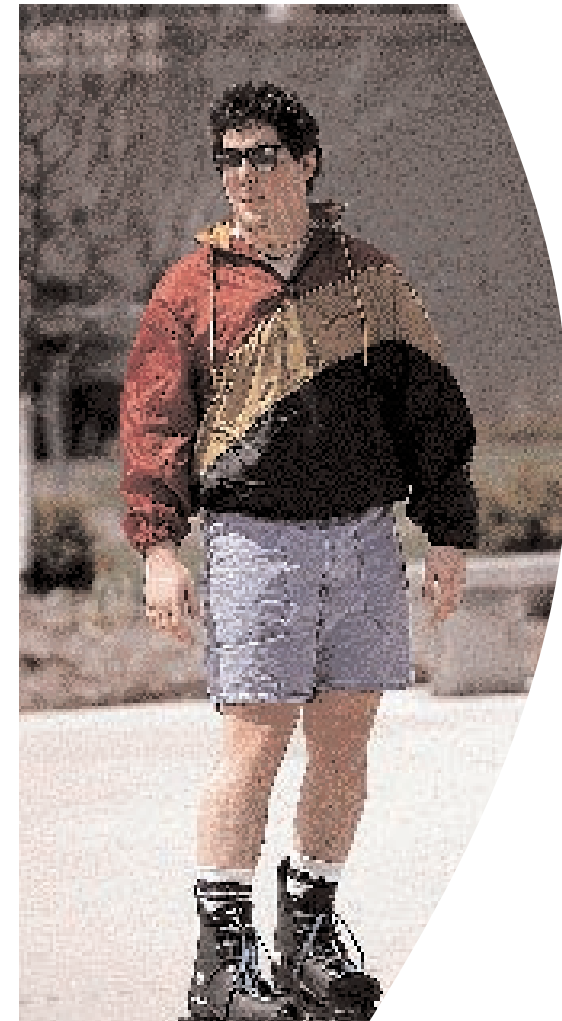
Is **popularity** the answer, the key to filling up the ache in us? That is often the message we get from our society. Consider the following ways people are encouraged to behave when around others their age whose opinions are important to them:

- A group of boys stands in the hallway and makes fun of an overweight girl who walks by. One boy wants to be accepted by the crowd, so he joins in the ridicule even though he knows he will later feel guilty about doing so.
- A group of girls spreads rumors that could destroy someone's reputation. One girl disapproves but says nothing in protest because she doesn't want the group to lash out at her.
- Everybody who is anybody is going to get together on Friday night to "get high." One girl doesn't really want to get into drugs, but she doesn't want to be rejected by those who do.
- Although she is afraid of the hazards of getting involved in sex, a ninth grader feels terribly pressured by her peers to become sexually active.
- A young Catholic person who enjoys religion and even likes going to Mass does not dare let others know. After all, doesn't everyone say that religion is boring and only for people who have no real life?

If we can just fit in and win everyone else's approval, the big ache in us will be healed. That is what the value of popularity says.

### Consumerism

Our economy is driven by the notion that people are primarily consumers who seek and acquire new products. Many of these products are totally unnecessary. The message we get from society, particularly from advertising, is that these products will bring us the happiness we are longing for. The attitude that acquiring unlimited material possessions is the key to fulfillment is known as **consumerism**.



### 16

For each example given here of the pressure to be popular, assign a rating from 1 to 5 of how typical this kind of popularity-seeking behavior is (a) in yourself and (b) among your friends. Let 1 represent "not at all typical" and 5, "extremely typical." Then write a paragraph about how strong the pressure to be popular is in you and your friends.



17

Rate each of the following statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

- Buying things I want makes me feel happy.
  - Advertising entices me to want the latest consumer items.
  - I wish I had more money than I have.
- In writing, summarize your thoughts on how you rated yourself.

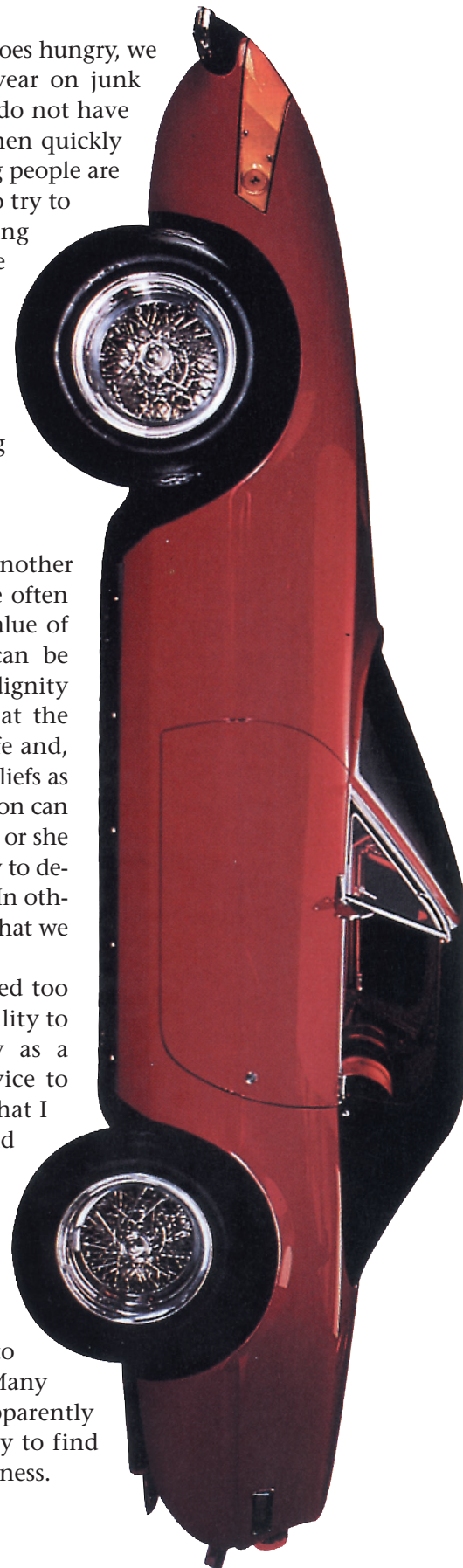


So while much of the world goes hungry, we spend billions of dollars each year on junk food. While many in the world do not have enough clothing, we buy and then quickly discard the latest fashions. Young people are a major target of advertisers, who try to pressure them to buy everything from junk food to brand-name shoes to the latest in sound systems. Each of us must carefully weigh the degree to which we are influenced by this cultural drive to acquire more and more things that fail to bring lasting joy.

### Individualism

“Look out for yourself” is another answer to life’s longings that we often hear from society. This is the value of **individualism**. Individualism can be positive. A commitment to the dignity and rights of the individual is at the center of a democratic way of life and, indeed, central to our religious beliefs as well. And it is also true that a person can contribute to the world only if he or she has taken the time and the energy to develop and grow as an individual. In other words, we cannot contribute what we do not have.

When individualism is carried too far, though, a sense of responsibility to others and to the community as a whole is lost. The value of service to others is replaced by the belief that I must take care of myself first and last. The notion of sacrificing any of one’s desires for the sake of the common good is considered old-fashioned. When the single moral guideline of our society becomes “I have to do my own thing,” we forget our need to be part of a caring community. Many people in our society have apparently achieved individual success, only to find that they are now dying of loneliness.



### Immediate Gratification

Our society is often described as a “feel good” society. Much human behavior seems to be based on the conviction, “If it feels good, do it.” Suffering is viewed as evil, even if the suffering is done out of care and concern for loved ones. As a result, when people experience inevitable loneliness or pain in life, they immediately want to block it out with alcohol, drugs, or perhaps more consumerism (“I’ll feel a lot better if I just buy something new”).

**Immediate gratification** means that we want and expect our needs to be met right now—not tomorrow and certainly not in a few years. This inability to be patient has harmful effects on human relationships. Many people view as friends only those who always make them feel good. As soon as a relationship requires sacrifice or commitment of them, they become fearful and want to cast it aside. They feel as free to discard friendships as they would a pair of blue jeans that is no longer fashionable. Without patience—the ability to wait—relationships cannot grow and flourish.

### Sexual Permissiveness

The belief that loneliness and longing will go away if we just find sexual satisfaction is a notion thrown at us constantly by advertising and the media. Sex is used to sell products as varied as soft drinks and cars. Underneath the ads, the message is, “You will be happy if you have this car (or this drink) because look who will be attracted to you! They’ll be climbing all over you!”

Let’s consider the attitude of **sexual permissiveness** in terms of the values already discussed.

- The impulse to engage in sexual activity at a young age is often driven by the desire to be popular, to be accepted and viewed as “with it” by others.
- For many people in our society, sexual relationships are just one more consumer item to be tried out and discarded as easily as a new video game.
- Because of society’s emphasis on individualism, many people are terrified of the thought of true commitment to another person, the kind of commitment required if sexual expression is to be wholesome and life giving.
- Because of the desire for immediate gratification, many people are impatient with the struggle and growth that will always be part of caring relationships.

18

Pretend a debate is going on inside you between these two sides:

- I have to take care of myself first and last.
- I have to be concerned about the good of the whole society.

Write out some of each side’s statements from the debate. Which side wins?

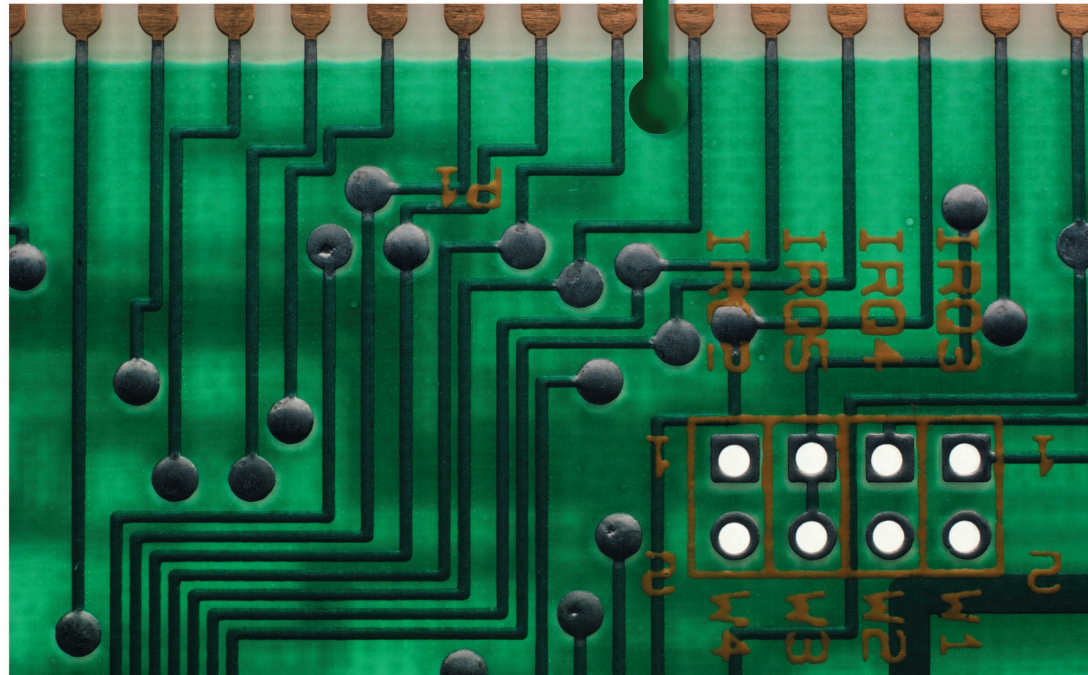


19

Rate your agreement with this statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and give examples from your experience to support your rating:

*When I want something, it is very hard for me to wait for it.*





These negative characteristics of our contemporary approach to sexuality are reflected in the nearly epidemic problem of teenage pregnancy—more than one million teenage girls in the United States become pregnant each year. Many of these girls and the boys and men who were involved with them probably engaged in sex thinking that it was the thing to do, that it was so natural there was surely nothing wrong with it, or that it was a response to a desire for immediate gratification that could not and should not be denied. Certainly many others who become pregnant believe that they were expressing an honest love and commitment. Yet the sad fact remains that most of these girls discover pain and even tragedy rather than joy, and they are often left to face the consequences alone. Too many give in to the pressure to have an abortion to get rid of the consequences of their behavior—another quick, instant “solution.” The boys’ and men’s lives, too, are poorer, not richer, for having brought about new life without a willingness or readiness to take on the responsibilities that accompany sexual activity.

Sexual permissiveness seems to offer an answer to life’s longing, but it is a shallow answer with potentially tragic effects, including sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

### Technological Fixes

Our society is based on a belief in progress, with an almost religious faith that technology will take care of our every need; we will always have **technological fixes** for our

20

Which of the following sentences best represents your view? Explain your answer in a paragraph.

- The prevailing values and attitudes around sexuality in our society are healthy and balanced.
- The prevailing values and attitudes around sexuality in our society are too permissive.
- The prevailing values and attitudes around sexuality in our society are too restrictive.



problems. So, for instance, if our planet is filling up with garbage, we can let the next generation deal with it because by then technology will have solved all the pollution problems. Or if I am in pain, a medicine or treatment will take this pain away. Technology to the rescue! If I have done serious damage to my heart through smoking, I can have surgery to make it all better, even a heart transplant! If I have gotten pregnant, I can have an abortion. If I am bored or lonely or hurting, I can watch a video or tap into a computer network to take away this feeling. Or I can drink alcohol or take a drug that will numb me.

Deep down we find it impossible to believe that technology is limited. This “techno-addiction” may temporarily fill the space in us that is yearning to be filled with true happiness—but not for long.

### The Need to Be Critical

During adolescence, people become intellectually capable of evaluating and criticizing everything they took for granted in childhood. Being critical is not simply a matter of finding fault with something we dislike. In **effective criticism** we take something we have learned—whether from parents, teachers, pastors, or others—and turn it over in our mind and question it. In the process we may find that our previous understanding needs to be updated. For example, consider a child who has developed a negative attitude toward people of other races. This attitude may have come about from comments made by a respected relative or family friend. In adolescence this young person develops the intellectual capacity to be critical of her or his past understanding and, upon reflection, may find that the attitude is in fact wrong and based on false assumptions.

The need to be critical goes beyond what we have learned in the past. We also need to be constructively critical of all the messages about happiness that bombard us. Television, videos, the Internet, ads, music, magazines, and computer games are powerful message carriers, often linked with consumer products. They surround and even saturate us; it is impossible to live in society without being influenced by the media. They are especially geared to captivate the minds and hearts of the young, and many teenagers soak up hours each day of media messages about what is valuable in life. We can approach the media in one of two ways: as a child, ready to be spoon-fed whatever they offer; or as a maturing adolescent who exercises critical intelligence.

21

Rate your reaction to the following statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): *I believe technology can solve just about any problem.* Explain your rating in writing.



The media surround and even saturate us with images of violence. *Student art: “Telegenetics,” mixed media by Jaime Maiorano, Sacred Heart High School, Kingston, Massachusetts*





To be critical of the media does not mean shutting down television, music, and so on. After all, they have many good things to offer. The media, at their best, convey youth culture by expressing the great longings, dreams, hurts, and fears of young people's hearts. But let's face it. The media are not always at their best. Much of what they have to offer is junk food for the mind—a diet of violence and brutality, exploitation, greed, sexual permissiveness, and crudeness. But rather than simply turn away from the media, young people can benefit from taking a good, long look at the menu and deciding what is worth eating. They can become more selective. A familiar saying goes, "You are what you eat."

Take, for example, the area of music. We can enjoy music passively, allowing it to fill us up with its points of view. Or we can listen consciously and critically to the music that fills our life. We can reflect on song lyrics and try to discover what values they promote. In many cases they will be good and wholesome and true—no sugarcoating on life, just an honest expression of how it feels. But listening critically helps us get beneath the surface to discover, What is being said here? What is being proposed as the way to fill the emptiness in life, to satisfy the human heart's longing for happiness? By asking critical questions, we can decide if we want to accept a particular message as a guideline of our own beliefs and values. We become our own best music critic.

### New Questions

Adolescence is the period when you can *be* reflective about life because now you are capable of **reflection**, careful thought or meditation. It is also the time when you are reaching out for relationships that are different from those of your childhood. You are coming into your own as a growing young person, with all the stresses and agonies that involves.

Now more than ever you may reflect on the aches and longings that never seem to go away, that eternal quest for happiness. Now more than ever you may be able to go beyond the shallow answers to life's longings that are offered by society. You may find yourself asking new questions you never asked before:

- Is there something deeper than the answers society offers?
- Why am I here? What's the purpose of my life? What will help me make sense of my life?
- What will really fill this longing in me?
- Is there something beyond what I see?
- Is there a God? And if so, does God care for me?
- If God exists, why is the world so full of hate, suffering, and misery?

22

If "you are what you eat" is true, what effects do you think your diet of media culture (like the music you listen to and TV shows or videos you watch) is having on you as a person?



These are religious questions, and they emerge from a growing maturity. Notice they are not religious questions in the same category as, Why do I have to go to church? That is a good question, too, but the above questions are more fundamental and radical than that. And you are ready for them. We will take up the "God question" in the next chapter, on faith, which is the basis for the remainder of this course on Catholic Christianity.



### For Review

- Briefly describe society's answers to life's longings.
- What does it mean to be critical of something we have learned, seen, or heard in the media?
- What are some religious questions many people begin to ask during adolescence?

## Our Heart Is Restless

More than fifteen hundred years ago, a young man from northern Africa was studying in Italy. He was leading a turbulent life, getting into all kinds of trouble and making his mother sick with worry about how he would "turn out." But he had something quite wonderful going for him: he was a searcher. He knew he was longing for happiness, and he knew that no matter how much he tried to find it (in all the wrong places), he came up short of real happiness. It was beyond his grasp. But he kept searching.

At last, partly through a wise teacher who introduced him to a new spiritual vision of life, this young man turned his life around and became a Christian. Years later, in his autobiography, he reflected prayerfully on what he had learned through all his searching. Addressing God, Augustine wrote: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Ultimately we are made for union with God in this life and forever. All our longings for happiness point finally to the One who created us out of love and set us forth on this restless, joyous, wonder-filled journey of life. The young man who recognized this was **Augustine**, who was later named a bishop and, after his death, a saint. Today he is considered one of the greatest thinkers and leaders in the history of Christianity. And it all began for him with a young man's searching heart.

23

Have you found yourself asking any of the questions on page 30 in the last year or so? If so, which ones? Write down any thoughts you may have had about these questions.



"Saint Augustine's Vision," by fifteenth-century painter Carpaccio

