



YOUTH MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY

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The Catholic Church’s ministry, or outreach, to pre-teens and teens evolved greatly over the past century. It moved from essentially being non-existent to being a concentrated effort, marked by the first ever Synod for Young People in 2018 with Pope Francis. Inherent in this movement is the understanding that culture and adolescents do not ask permission of the Church to evolve or change. Indeed, both of these are constantly in flux, equally influencing and being influenced by each other. In many ways, post-modern pre-teens and teens see themselves as existing within various spheres of existence at the same time. Considering this, if the Church does not evolve its ministry to young people, it will forfeit its mission in helping adolescents encounter the person of Jesus in a pluralistic world, becoming a sphere within which young people choose to no longer exist within.

THE PROBLEM

This stark possibility is made visible by the current situation of disaffiliation from religion. This is to say, that while young people may still attend religious services or functions, they no longer consider themselves personally affiliated with their religion.

According to research done by St Mary’s Press and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), the reality is that:

- The median age of disaffiliation is 13, with 74% of Catholic young people disaffiliating between the ages of 10 and 20.
- Once individuals disaffiliate, there is no guarantee they will reaffiliate later in life. The old concept of a life-cycle (i.e. that individuals will return when they marry or have kids) is becoming less and less a reality.
- The fastest growing religious affiliation is that of no religious affiliation (i.e. “nones”).
- While individuals may disaffiliate, and even leave the Church, their desire and need for purpose, meaning, and answers to key life questions still remain.
(*Going, Going, Gone* 11, 32-33; *McCarthy* 6-8)

To this end, Pope Francis states in *Christus Vivit*, his Apostolic Exhortation resulting from the 2018 Synod on Young People, that:

“Even though to many young people, God, religion and the Church seem empty words, they are sensitive to the figure of Jesus when he is presented in an attractive and effective way. Consequently, the Church should not be excessively caught up in herself but instead, and above all, reflect Jesus Christ. This means humbly acknowledging that some things concretely need to change, and if that is to happen, she needs to appreciate the vision but also the criticisms of young people.” (#39)

Considering this, the Church’s ministry to young people must be attentive to the signs of our times and be formed in such a way that is Christ-centered, multifaceted and intentional in its approach.

THE MISSION

Although the methods and approaches the Church uses in its ministry to young people may change, its ultimate mission does not. **The primary mission of the Church’s ministry to young people must always be to help them encounter Jesus and accompany them in becoming life-long, engaged disciples.** This is not a goal we have constructed but rather the goal given to the entire community of believers by Jesus Himself:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Mt 18:19)

Inherent to this are three key points of understanding:

1. It is ultimately through encountering the Good News of Jesus, and freely choosing to follow the statutes He proclaimed, that young people can fully realize who they are and live life to the full.
2. While the Church ministers to young people, young people are also called to be active members of the Church community. Therefore, ministry to teens by the Church also means ministry by teens.
3. The family is considered to be the “domestic Church”. This means that it is in the context of the family that pre-teens and teens first encounter God and learn to prayerfully seek His will. Therefore, the Church’s ministry to young people must also include ministry to and by families.

Pope Francis echoes these points stating:

“No matter how much you live the experience of these years of your youth, you will never know their deepest and fullest meaning unless you encounter each day your best friend, the friend who is Jesus...Although it is never easy to approach young people, two things have become increasingly evident: the realization that the entire community has to be involved in evangelizing them, and the urgent requirement that young people take on a greater role in pastoral outreach.” (*Christus Vivit*, #150, 202)

THE VISION

The need for greater pastoral outreach to young people was communicated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) document *Renewing the Vision*. In it, the USCCB highlights that the Church's ministry to young people must transcend previous structures and stereotypes. The Church's outreach to youth must not be solely dedicated to the reception of catechetical knowledge. Rather, the Church must seek to develop a comprehensive youth ministry, which must include all of the following:

- **Advocacy for youth**
- **Differentiated catechesis**
- **Growing of communal life**
- **Evangelization of youth**
- **Opportunities to engage in justice and service**
- **Leadership development**
- **Pastoral care of youth**
- **Opportunities for prayer and worship**

Indeed, Pope Francis echoes that ministry to youth must evolve beyond previous structures and practices used by the Church, explaining that:

“we should take into greater consideration those practices that have shown their value – the methods, language and aims that have proved truly effective in bringing young people to Christ and the Church. It does not matter where they are coming from or what labels they have received, whether “conservative” or “liberal”, “traditional” or “progressive”. What is important is that we make use of everything that has borne good fruit and effectively communicates the joy of the Gospel.” (*Christus Vivit*, #205)

APPLYING THE VISION

The components of a comprehensive vision for youth ministry must be applied in such a way that recognizes the current realities and needs of pre-teens and teens. These include:

1. **The primacy of identity formation**

The main task of pre-adolescent and adolescent development is essentially to develop an understanding of “who I am” to then move to understanding “who I am in relation to others”. This means that adolescents move more quickly between different spheres of existence than other stages of development. Without proper identity formation, adolescents risk having a “patch-work self”, lacking the proper foundation to handle life's changes and pitfalls.

2. **The importance of experience**

Experience is a key factor in how pre-teens and teens construct their worldviews and make decisions. As a result of their pluralistic existence, they are rich in experience. This includes their experiences of God, who is omnipresent across all spheres of existence.

3. The use of relational language

While young people are rich in their experiences of God, they struggle to articulate these experiences. However, they are already fluent in a correlating language: the language of relationships. In many instances, young people desire places where they are known by name and missed when they are gone. In other words, they desire authentic relationships.

4. The social construction of knowledge

Since adolescent development occurs in the context of relationships, the way they construct knowledge is also done relationally. Through their various relationships, pre-teens and teens gather information, test it against what they have already learned, and create new knowledge. It is in this testing and retesting that individuals not only come to know who they are but also establish what they believe to be true.

5. The transition from discovery, to passion, to freedom

Pre-teens are driven by a desire for discovery. They personalize ideas by connecting pieces of information together. As pre-teens develop into teens, they become driven by a desire for passion. Their ability to empathize and love grows. For them, ideas become prioritized by their perceived risk level and relation to personal experience. In both instances, discovery and passion are fueled by the desire for freedom, as adolescents move toward becoming more autonomous and self-deterministic.

Considering these realities and needs, the faith development of young people is affected in the following unique ways:

1. Belonging comes before believing

It used to be true that an individual was considered to be affiliated with a religion because they accepted that religion's beliefs. However, that is no longer the case. Individuals must first have a sense of being welcomed and belonging to the community. Once they do, they will be open to joining that community and learning their beliefs.

2. Experiences of God are essential

Abstract concepts and terms that cannot be personalized are seen as irrelevant or unnecessary to a young person's sense of self. As a result, it is necessary to expose pre-teens and teens to experiences of God and help individuals articulate them. According to the National Study on Youth and Religion, experiences such as retreats, conferences, mission trips and extended service projects have been shown to affect young people's sense of their closeness to God, the degree of importance that faith holds in their daily lives, and even how often they read the Bible alone (58).

3. Like Parent, like Child

Parents have a significant influence on their children. As shown by sociologist Christian Smith, the majority of U.S. teens tend to be very similar to their parents in terms of religion, beliefs, and religious practices. In many ways, if an individual wants to know what a young person's faith life will look like later on, their parents' current faith life is a good indication (68,

208). If parents' work to practice the faith and communicate the Gospel at home, pre-teens and teens have a much higher chance of becoming engaged disciples.

4. Accompaniment is necessary

Pre-teens and teens look for consistent adults and spaces to turn to as they work through struggles, doubts, and questions. At a time when their lives are in flux, consistency and reliability are key. If teens do not find reliable spaces and individuals, they will go elsewhere in search of them. As shown by the Fuller Youth Institute's Research Team, the number one item adolescents want more of is deep conversation. This is because while 7 in 10 students struggle with doubts, at most only 2 in 10 students are likely to have helpful conversations about those doubts (143-144). If disaffiliation is to be curbed, then mentors willing to accompany pre-teens and teens in open discussion is essential.

OUR INITIATIVES

As a result of the aforementioned, St Teresa of Avila Church, in developing a comprehensive youth ministry, seeks to:

- **Focus on the Mass**

The Mass is the "source and summit" of our Christian lives. Without the Mass, our relationship with God suffers and any youth ministry is impossible. By making Mass available at various times, and inviting pre-teens and teens to engage in our Teen Mass, we seek to help them encounter Jesus, draw them into the life of the Church, and engage in prayer and worship.

- **Support Parents in communicating the faith**

Supporting parents in evangelizing their children, especially during pre-adolescence and adolescence, helps support both strong Catholic families and engaged disciples. By providing Parent Cues (digital faith formation done at home), resources for parents to know how to communicate the faith, and opportunities for parents to engage in youth ministry programs, parents can be equipped and be a more active part of their children's faith development.

- **Provide Large Group Experiences**

Large group experiences help provide pre-teens and teens with the opportunity to first encounter the faith and see themselves as part of the wider Church. From Middle School Edge Nights, to Retreats, to the Steubenville NYC Conference, to other trips and pilgrimages that we offer, our goal is to help teens see the faith as relevant and engaging.

- **Create Small Group Spaces**

Small Group series allow for pre-teens and teens to develop relationships intentionally, take away any angst present in larger settings, and provides the space they need to question. Whether it is through our NOVA series for Middle Schoolers or our ALPHA series for High Schoolers, we strive to accompany individuals, provide them with a sense of belonging, and help them make the faith personal.

- **Be Intentional in Sacramental Preparation**

Confirmation is a sacrament that provides a special strengthening from the Holy Spirit, meant to aid individuals in being more perfect messengers and witnesses of their Baptismal mission (CCC 1285). By offering preparation to teens at least in 9th grade, in the same grade level that Confirmation has been traditionally received in the Archdiocese of Newark, we can accompany teens in a natural period of life transition. By gearing preparation toward this transition and the questions or doubts that come with it, Confirmation preparation becomes an opportunity for encounter and a space to connect faith to a crucial time of life. In this way, we hope that Confirmation will not be a sacrament of “goodbye”, as Pope Francis has cautioned, but a sacrament of mission that points to what to do next after receiving it.

- **Engage in Outreach Opportunities**

The opportunity to serve with the Church in the community allows pre-teens and teens recognize their ability to bring positive change while developing their sense of empathy. Whether it is by partnering with our Church ministries, such as the Christ Child Society, or participating in a Service Learning Project, our hope is that they not only learn from the wealth of the Church’s social teaching but also learn to advocate for the needs of others.

- **Lead Up**

When young people help lead, the Church benefits from their perspectives, stories, and experiences. Our upperclassmen ministry, OMEGA, not only allows for their continued accompaniment but also provides teens with opportunities to create initiatives they find important, lead up in the Parish, and provide evangelization and care for their peers. Pre-teens and teens are also encouraged to lead by taking roles at Mass or providing leadership for younger individuals, such as on Retreats or in our Parish’s Children’s Ministry.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

While providing opportunities and initiatives are key, so too is the manner in which they are done. The following principles are meant to guide our Youth Ministry in our mission to help pre-teens and teens encounter Jesus and become life-long, engaged disciples:

- **Affirm and Mobilize**

By affirming young people’s personal stories and mobilizing their potential, we can help them see Jesus’ story in their own and use their potential for mission.

- **Be Intentional**

Being intentional in how we minister, run programs, and share the faith communicates to young people that both they and the faith are important and worth putting time and effort into.

- **Minister Relationally**

The faith is best communicated by build trusting, appropriate relationships with and between young people. In this way, they can be invited to know others, be invested in and know they matter, and then in turn invite others to experience the same.

- **Be Authentic**
If what we offer and how we act is not real, then it does not create a ministry that is honest, open, and trustworthy. By encouraging adults, teens, and pre-teens to be real, we can help them discover how to form authentic relationships with God and others.
- **Kerygma Comes First**
Kerygma is the Greek word for “proclamation”, referring to an individual’s initial encounter with the Good News that Jesus died and rose so that we may have life. By focusing first on helping pre-teens and teens hear the Kerygma, we hope that they are first touched by Jesus’ saving message and “till the soil” of their hearts. Without doing so, any other teaching of the faith will not be readily received.
- **Experience Faith**
By focusing on the experiential, and not just conceptual, we seek to help pre-teens and teens understand that a relationship with God is a real, lived experience rather than as an abstract concept.
- **Equip, Don’t Just Entertain**
While engaging pre-teens and teens is important to capture their attention, life-long and engaged discipleship requires being equipped with knowing how to follow Jesus in daily life. By helping them make connections between faith and life, and exposing them to the wealth of the Catholic Tradition, our aim is to prepare them to follow Christ well beyond their time with us.

Ultimately, Jesus reminded His disciples that those who choose to follow Him will face difficulties (Jn 15:18). Yet, it is in picking up our crosses daily and following Him that we are able to build the Kingdom of God and work toward completing the mission Jesus gave us (Lk 9:23). Likewise, it is through the shared efforts of parents, young people, and the larger community of believers that the Church will be able to effectively help young people encounter Jesus and become life-long, engaged disciples.

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Appendix

A Disciple is one who...

Is Rooted in God	Serves Others	Knows and Shares the Faith	Has an active Prayer Life	Is a genuine Christian Friend	Is connected to the Church Community
Step 1					
Has Encounter Experiences	Realizes the necessity of serving others	Has a basic knowledge of the Faith & Scripture	Learns basic forms of Prayer and Worship	Has models of Christian Friendship	Attends Mass and feels welcome here
Step 2					
Desires a relationship with God	Realizes their effect on others through service	Grows in their knowledge of the Faith & Scripture and its practicality	Understands what Prayer is and grows their toolkit of Prayer	Has Friends here that they identify with	Attends Mass and feels that they belong here
Step 3					
Turns to God and sees life through a Christian Lens	Makes connection between service and Catholic Social Teaching	Can articulate key aspects of the Faith & Scripture, learns application	Develops habits of Prayer in their life	Knows how to be authentic and have healthy relationships	Sees Church as important to life
Step 4					
Turns to God and the Faith to influence their life and decisions	Can identify areas in need and how to address them with Catholic Social Teaching	Shares the Faith with others, including peers, and integrates the Gospel message into their lives	Has an active Prayer Life that is supported through tool, people, and the life of the Church	Knows who they are, goes outside of their comfort zone, and helps create a friendship culture	Is active in the life of the Church beyond Youth Ministry