

Community at the Crossroads: The Relationship between Adolescents and the Catholic Church

by Tom East

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The Catholic Church and young people are standing together at a crucial crossroad. This generation is spiritually open and remarkably generous. They seem ready to throw themselves completely into a cause or direction that catches their imagination. The Catholic Church stands open to receive young disciples and support them as full members and sharers in the mission of being Christ in the world. Yet, there are also tensions in this relationship. To seize this opportunity, the Catholic Church is challenged to see and include youth in new ways. For their part, youth are challenged to see the Catholic Church in its fullness and open themselves to a transforming relationship.

Roles and Dimensions of the Relationship

Relationships are guided by feelings, affection, and mutuality. They exist in the context of roles and a sense of identity. As a father, I relate to my children with love. I have many different feelings, but these feelings are bound within the relationship of father to child. What is the relationship of the church with adolescents? These relationships will similarly be bound by identity and role.

The church exists to evangelize. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the identity of the Catholic Church is described: “the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church . . . she exists in order to evangelize.”¹ The Catholic Church is the messenger of the Word made flesh. John Shea describes the process of evangelization and conversion in this way:

This transformation entails a change of consciousness and action from a condition characterized as seeing, hearing, awake, found and risen. The catalyst of this change is the Word. Once this Word is heard, it can be dismissed, received in a shallow way, overcome by competing interests, or fully realized and integrated. Therefore spiritual

transformation is always an invitation offered by the Word to which people respond in varying degrees.²

To live this identity, the church relates to adolescents as the universal church, represented by the pope and acting as teaching authority. The Catholic Church also relates to youth as local church in a diocese or archdiocese, which can include expression in Catholic schools and youth-serving agencies. Ultimately, the face of church for youth is parish and family as the “domestic church.” Each of these faces has a different but related connection to adolescents. These relationships carry both a sense of Catholic identity and a sense of belonging that is local and connected to the larger, global community which is the Catholic Church.

The essential identity of adolescence is living in this stage that is neither child nor adult. In a sense, adolescence exist to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. The marks of this transition are questioning, stretching, confidence, insecurity, discovery, and confusion. To make this transition, youth need a combination of freedom and boundaries. They need enough freedom to experience choices and consequences and enough boundaries to remain safe. Throughout this experience they need guides and mentors. They also have a great deal of energy, enthusiasm, creativity, and idealism to share with children and adults of all ages.

Adolescents relate to the church from a variety of roles. The role of some youth who are outside of church participation is as receivers of outreach and evangelization. This role is the genesis of the youth ministry movement that began in the late 1800s when young people were moving to cities in great numbers. The church went to the street corners where youth were hanging out and invited youth to come and see. Some youth are members

of the Catholic Church by right of baptism and many of these are fully initiated. Most of these youth relate to the church as members of a family who belong to a parish. It is interesting that Catholic parishes count the number of families who belong, while most Protestant churches count members. This is part of how we relate to youth and children. Another important role of youth that forms their identity and a large part of the church's relationship is that of learner or student. The Catholic Church has made particularly large investment in Catholic education. Even those youth who are not students in a Catholic school often relate to the Catholic Church as a learner, participating in religious education, sacramental preparation, or pastoral ministry programs.

Vision and Experience

In his various addresses about youth and youth ministry, Pope John Paul II describes dimensions of the relationship of the church with adolescents. In this address he describes our relationship to youth as companion:

As Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus, so the Church must become today the traveling companion of young people . . .³

*Youth Sent to Proclaim True Liberation,
World Youth Day 1995, Philippines*

This journey of adolescence takes young people on a path towards responsible adult living. As people of faith, we know that the path of this journey is not random; our loving God created each young person in love and has a plan for each one's life. We are called to accompany youth on this journey so that faith-filled youth will become faithful adult disciples. When Jesus accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he listened to their questions, he explained the truths of faith, he revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread, and he sent them forth to tell others.



This is the job description of the faith community, and in particular, the job of the ministry

leader and catechist who is acting on behalf of the Catholic Church community. To walk with youth, we must learn their questions and understand their experiences.

In another address, the Holy Father reminds leaders of our other roles with youth:

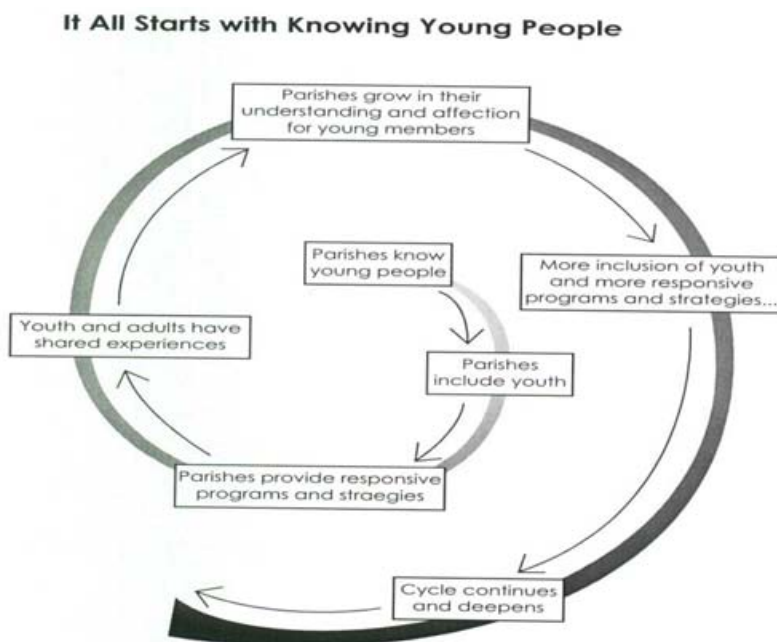
- be open to adolescents
- involve them in projects and programs of formation
- avoid isolating them from the community
- help them see the real benefits of their efforts

As leaders in the field of the youth apostolate, your task will be to help your parishes, dioceses, associations, and movements to be truly open to the personal, social, and spiritual needs of young people. You will have to find ways of involving young people in projects and activities of formation, spirituality, and service, giving them responsibility for themselves and their work, and taking care to avoid isolating them and their apostolate from the rest of the ecclesial community. Young people need to be able to see the practical relevance of their efforts to meet the real needs of people, especially the poor and neglected. They should also be able to see that their apostolate belongs fully to the Church's mission in the world.⁴

In *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, the United States Bishops describe the role of the Catholic Church within the goals of youth ministry. The church empowers young disciples. The church draws young people into responsible participation, and promotes young people's personal and spiritual growth. Parishes are guided to become "youth friendly" and be a place where youth are welcomed, ministered to, and invited to share their gifts.

One way that we can describe the relationship of adolescent and the church is as reflectors of God's love for one another. In *A Vision of Youth Ministry*, the faith community is guided to become a sign of God's love. To become a sign of God's love, we also need to see ourselves as a faith community, as revealing the face of Christ to youth.

Diagram 1: Relational Pattern for Ministry⁹



Part of the vision of youth ministry is to present to youth the richness of the person of Christ, which perhaps exceeds the ability of one person to capture, but which might be effected by the collective ministry of the many persons who make up the Church.⁵

In their *Message to Youth*, the bishops of the United States describe the way that God is revealed to them as they share their hopes for this relationship:

In you, we see the face of God. You are the young Church of today and our hope for the future . . . You are truly a gift, and we praise and thank God for you . . . You bring to the parish community youthfulness, energy, vitality, hopefulness and vision.⁶

Research with youth has shown the fruition of this vision. In the 1996 study conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, almost all youth who participated in the research shared they were “proud to be Catholic” (94%), “admire the pope” (89%), and “feel welcome at church” (90%). This type of enthusiasm has been amply demonstrated in the comments of youth at the recent World Youth Day events and National Catholic Youth Conferences. In the 2004 study, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, the

parish community was described as a welcoming home for young people.

. . . youth and adults use images like “second home,” “part of the fabric,” and “heart of the parish.” They describe in glowing terms their parish’s feeling about young people and their parish’s support for youth ministry.⁷

In these interviews, youth and adults described the transforming impact that involvement in youth ministry and parish life has upon young people. This involvement was nurtured in parish communities that developed relationships with young people. These relationships became the central pattern for ministry.

As researchers, we did not find a new model for youth ministry or a single event or strategy that made the difference for parishes with effective youth ministry. What we found was this pattern: from knowing youth, parishes responded to youth’s needs and included their gifts in their community.⁸

Ways of Seeing Youth

When the Catholic Church is effective in developing and nurturing a transforming and mutual relationship with its young members, the

impact on the lives of the young and on the whole community is incredible. One of the reasons why the church is able to develop this relationship is because of the way young people are viewed. At World Youth Day in Sydney (2008), Pope Benedict XVI warned youth about those who see them in a narrow, opportunistic way:

Do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth.¹⁰

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The Catholic Church sees youth as God's beloved and treats them as treasured members of the community as well as coworkers in our mission. This means that to be authentic and to have an impact, church leaders must look beyond any singular role of a young person. Dr. Christian Smith, director for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, recently wrote to youth workers on this topic:

Young people, especially in view of the gospel, are fundamentally persons, not students. . . . We should . . . push back on society's labels by insisting that teenagers are referenced by the full depth, richness, and complexity of their personhood. They should be hearing from us: "Unlike most of the rest of society, we understand and value you in the fullness of who you are. Here among God's people we know you as real human persons—you don't have to perform to be accepted here. Please be your real selves."¹¹

Sometimes, elements of the church struggle to see youth in this broad, human way and view youth only in their role as learner of the faith.

There are two problems that occur from this perspective. First, the relationships of youth to the Catholic Church and their sense of faith identity vary greatly. If we go back 150 years, when Catholic youth in the United States were mostly located in urban and rural communities, Catholic faith was an extension of ethnic and extended family identity. Church was the center of the community's social life. For many communities, the church served a variety of social, economic, and political roles, especially when newly arrived Catholics were trying to get started here. With so many dimensions of a relationship already in place, it was not unusual for a parish to focus its attention on youth in their role as student of the faith. Now, many youth and their families need renewed evangelization and struggle with the competing values between secular society and the Catholic Church. Treating youth only as students rings hollow without a broader relationship. It is almost like treating a stranger on the street as a member of the family—"Hey you, did you eat your veggies?" "You over there, it's time to do your chores!"

A second challenge in this relationship occurs when the vibrancy of faith in the community is impoverished. Youth learn about faith by watching faith in action and by practicing faith, they do not learn faith values abstractly. Michael Warren describes this difficulty:

Where the life of the worshipping assembly is vital and actual, young people actively are invited to participate fully in the community and to live the Gospel. However, where that worship lacks vitality, the parish's efforts at youth ministry generally will struggle and young people will be reluctant to participate . . . Where a congregation's life exhibits little vibrant gospel living—with all the uncomfortable questions that go along with that living—catechesis is doomed to become little more than lists of memorable tenets in floppy paperback books.¹²

These perspectives demonstrate two important elements for building relationships within the Catholic Church including her young members. First, the church needs to relate to youth in a

broad way not through a narrow role. Second, transforming relationships are built by connecting youth with people, young and old, who are living their faith in a vibrant and authentic way.

Multiple Contact Points

One person and one role cannot carry the hopes for youth and their relationship with the Catholic Church. Youth need multiple contact points with faith and faithful people. In the *Effective Practices* research, youth and adults described communities that mediated living faith:

Youth are ministered to within a web of relationships: youth with youth, youth with adults, parish community with youth, and youth in their families.¹³

A similar finding reinforced the multiple contact points that support deeper participation in the community. In the analysis provided for the report on the Catholic results of the *National Study on Youth and Religion*, Dr. Charlotte McCorquodale identified a synergy between the various aspects of youth participation:

... we concluded that in terms of Catholic youth who are engaged in their faith, 'more equals more,' meaning that when Catholic youth participate in some youth programs, they are more likely to participate in others.¹⁴

Carol Lytch found particular elements that are mutually supporting in developing a deeper sense of belonging. In her book, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, she identifies three fundamental conditions of human nature—belonging, believing (a sense of meaning), and achieving competence (opportunities to develop competence). When these three conditions are addressed in the relationship of a congregation with its young members, belonging and commitment deepen:

When churches' ministries with youth include these three components, teens will restructure their time and attention to participate in them . . . Teens participated at highest levels in their churches when they perceived them to offer all three of these components.¹⁵

As we see in this research, parishes can nurture the relationship of youth within the Catholic Church by helping youth feel that they belong, by providing formation that helps youth understand and believe, and by providing ways for youth to share their gifts as they develop competencies and skills. Though the relationship includes the larger, global dimensions, the local parish is a foundational place where this relationship is nurtured for youth and their families.

Earlier in this essay, I shared about parishes that provided for these dimensions and helped youth feel at home. Unfortunately, this is not the experience for all young people. In many parishes youth feel judged and isolated rather than welcomed. They do not experience programs and opportunities for community and formation. When they try to get involved and share their ideas and gifts, they experience resistance and roadblocks. Picture this situation: a youth with dyed hair and multiple piercings walks into a sparsely crowded church and receives glares from older members of the community. It is puzzling to the young person and to

many other members of the community: Even if we are unsettled by her appearance, shouldn't we be glad the young person is here? In another example in

a parish that has asked youth to come and sit up front together for a liturgy geared to adolescents and their families, an adult comes up to several youth after Mass to berate their behavior during liturgy and their appearance. It is not surprising that those front "youth" rows of the church were empty for the next several Sundays. In these situations, the fear of adults about the young generation has been channeled in hostile, destructive ways. Communities need leadership to channel this fear into care, concern, and welcome.



Another area of opportunity and challenge is addressing the needs and including the gifts of youth and families from among the diverse cultural communities within the church. These relationships need to be strengthened because many youth feel left out of current models and methods for ministry and catechesis. In *Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens*, a vision for parish life is expanded in this analysis of a promising direction for ministry and catechesis with Hispanic youth and others from diverse cultural groups:

When thinking about how to structure an appropriate youth ministry for a multicultural parish that seeks to be united in spirit and mission, enriched by its diversity, and able to inculcate the Gospel in the various ethnic and cultural milieus of the faith, the model of the church as a ‘community of communities’ stands out.¹⁶

In this model, the parish includes all youth in all aspects of ministry while it supports the development of ministries for youth from different cultural groups. Within these ministries, ministry can rely on the strengths and leadership within the culture. It seems natural that parishes would provide a variety of “groupings” based on need and interest. When race, language, or culture is presented as a reason for distinctive ministries, this is sometimes misunderstood as segregation or treated as some type of threat to unity. The alternative is the development of a single ministry group that leaves out many youth and families.¹⁷

Generational Differences and Teaching Authority

Different generational groups perceive Catholic identity and belonging in different ways. The attitudes of youth often surprise older adults. I remember traveling with youth to World Youth Day and having the media constantly want to talk to the young people about disagreements with the Catholic Church. The youth just wanted to talk about how glad they were to be there, how excited they were to be Catholic, and how much they loved the pope. Many adults were looking for a consistency in a set of beliefs and in the sense of belonging that is different for young people

than it is for adults. Ed Gordon describes this in comparing the Millennial generation, those born in the 1980s and ‘90s with other groups of Catholics, such as the pre-Vatican II generation, born before 1945, the Vatican II generation, born between 1946 and 1964, and the Post-Vatican II group, born between 1964 and 1980.

However, it appears that the Millennials have an even more tenuous relationship to the Catholic Church than the Gen-Xers. Catholic identity for this group is similar to the post-Vatican II group, that is, loosely connected and weakly committed. Yet this generation seems to emphasize many devotional aspects that puzzle their elders, especially the Vatican II Catholics, who hold most of the leadership positions in church ministry (except for youth ministry).¹⁸

It is not surprising that the generations differ in their relationship with Catholic Church because the contexts were very different. The pre-Vatican II Catholics grew up in a time when being Catholic was outside the mainstream Protestant culture. Catholics were trying to establish themselves economically as well as politically. For these Catholics, belonging to a sometimes persecuted minority meant assent to the faith and to the teaching authority of the pope, bishops, and clergy. Teachings of the faith were clearly taught in memorizable formulas as were prayer forms that were often practiced by families. After Vatican II, the Catholic Church in the United States often communicated itself as a resource to the faithful who should take personal responsibility for their faith journey. By this time, Catholics were fully established in the middle class and within the mainstream of American society. These changes and others created the current context for relationship between the church and its young members.

In the 2005 study, *American Catholics Today*, the researchers conclude that younger Catholics concur on core issues of theology with the other generational cohorts.

In the 2005 study, *American Catholics Today*, the researchers conclude that younger Catholics concur on core issues of theology with the other generational cohorts. There are two key areas of difference. First, the Millennial Generation identifies less strongly in the areas of commitment and faith identity.¹⁹ Second, on key issues of moral teaching, the younger generation attaches significantly lower levels of importance to assent to Catholic Church teachings, especially around issues of abortion (7% of Millennials identify this teaching is very important versus 58% of pre-Vatican II and 44% of Vatican II) or celibate male clergy (11% for Millennials versus 36% for pre-Vatican II and 25% for Vatican II).²⁰

These findings represent a tension point in the relationship and a key issue for pastoral practice. The Catholic Church finds itself needing to evangelize younger Catholics and present the fullness of its teachings at the same time that youth are welcomed, ministered with, and invited to share their gifts and energies. The most important thing the church can do through the ministries that serve youth is surround young people with love and care while sharing the teachings of the church with clarity, through witness and application of the faith. We need to avoid drawing a line in the sand and telling youth that they are with us or against us because of their assent to a belief on a particular issue. This type of action divides the community and isolates youth and their families at the precise moment when they need to be embraced, included, and evangelized.

Building Our Relationships

From a variety of perspectives, we see that the relationship between the Catholic Church and its young members grows deeper when youth are considered in a holistic way, when they have multiple contact points with the faith community and when they are engaged in ministry formation that helps them belong, believe, and share their gifts. To continue to build these relationships, the church and her ministers should consider the following:

- **Look broadly at the youth population and develop targeted ministries for different segments.** Some youth and their families are looking to go deeper and become more engaged in formation and service. Other youth and families need evangelization and invitation. A variety of ministry

approaches are needed to meet these diverse needs.

- **Attend to youth in a holistic way.** Youth are more than just a family member or learner. Our ministry responses and faith formation needs to address and engage the whole young person.
- **Touch their hearts and make it personal.** Youth yearn to belong and relate to people who care about them and value them as individuals. To build this relationship, we need to learn names, know youth, and provide ministries that move, inspire, and engage.
- **Provide multiple contact points.** Youth grow in commitment through a variety of relationships. They benefit from hearing different voices that provide an echo of faith.
- **Listen and include the youth, families, and leaders from among the diverse cultures within the community.** Dioceses and parishes are learning new ways to come to know and include the needs and gifts of people from various cultures in developing authentic and inclusive ministry responses.
- **Go to where the youth are, including technology.** The roots of youth ministry are to go to the corners where youth hang out. To do this today, we should be going to the web, and we should be meeting youth in technology as a means to draw them towards gathered participation with the faith community.
- **Engage youth in ministries that help them belong, believe, and share their gifts.** These elements address fundamental human needs that profoundly shape the youth and young adult years. Ministry that addresses these elements develops the commitment and identity that are foundational to a strong relationship with the church.

In many ways, it is a misnomer to talk about the relationship between the Catholic Church and adolescents since many youth are young members of the church. Yet, the period of adolescence includes a natural period of questioning and identity development in which youth often step outside and consider their commitments as they choose to deepen some relationships and remove themselves from others. The church has the opportunity to stand with youth in this moment, know them, minister with them, and engage their energies as coworkers in

the mission of being Christ to the world. To seize this opportunity, the Catholic Church will need to share the faith clearly and be willing to adopt new methods for responding to youth and including them.

About the Author

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Endnotes

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Generational Differences

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