

Task Force Report on Young Adult Ministry

Introduction

This report has been compiled by 80 young adults of the Diocese of Rochester. These people, whether regular churchgoers or not, agreed to complete questionnaires, come to meetings, explain how they relate to the Church, and share their personal experiences.

Because the report deals specifically with ways the Diocese of Rochester can improve its ministry to and with young adults, much of the paper that follows is necessarily critical. However, it is important to stress that much of the message of the young adults consulted was neither bitter nor hostile to the Church. Rather, there was a decidedly hopeful, optimistic tone. The young adults who participated in this process are, for the most part, deeply committed to their life in the Church. They seek to grow and they challenge the Church to do likewise.

Several specific areas were mentioned repeatedly. Some young adults have had many good experiences with Church. They may feel a sense of belonging, a sense of community, in their local parishes. When asked to describe important experiences they have had with Church, the consistently named the sacraments and counseling. Some people spoke enthusiastically of their participation in retreats and renewal groups. Others stated that the time they spent in Catholic high schools and/or campus ministry helped them learn the potential for their involvement and their responsibility to be involved in the life of the Church. Some said they had had good experiences as lecturers, Eucharistic ministers, or members of parish councils and other parish committees. Most agreed that, at least to some extent, the Church's teachings are relevant to the major questions and concerns of their lives. Yet, when these people spoke of their friends and acquaintances, the picture was not so hopeful. The majority of young adults, including those raised in the Catholic tradition, are not affiliated with any institutional religion. Although, by virtue of their numbers, young adults should form the bulk of the Church's worshipping communities, they clearly do not.

Much can probably be learned by a closer look at some of the positive experiences some young adults have had. By ascertaining why certain approaches and programs have favorable results, the Church of Rochester can perhaps transfer these successes to new situations.

Overview: Young Adults in Modern Society and in the Church

There are presently more than 60 million young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 in the United States. Although they comprise the largest single segment of our nation's population, they frequently feel alienated from the greater society and its institutions, including the Catholic Church. The Church has recognized this alienation and has begun to search for ways to lessen it. Young adults need the Church — its care and its challenge — and the Church needs the gifts of young adults. The following pages seek to identify these young adults, offer reasons why they are different from older adults and previous generations, and suggest ways in which the Church might address and engage them.

Although young adults are commonly identified as those persons who fall into a certain age range, it is more proper to describe the young adult years as a passage or orientation to life. These are years of change and tentativeness — directions are sought, choices are tested, and commitments conditionally made. The person deals with questions regarding his/her relationship to society, vocation or career, social role, and lifestyle. Even those who are married or settled into an occupation frequently do not assume these choices set a definitive direction for the rest of their lives.

It is important to note the diversity within this population. Half of all young adults are single, those never married as well as the separated, divorced, and widowed. Young adults include the unemployed, homosexual, and those from racial minorities. In addition, within this grouping two or three totally separate generations are included. There are those who are the products of the '60s and those who are the consumers of the '70s. In the context of Church, some are the products of the "old Church," while some are the experiments of what has been called the "paste pot and poster age" of religious education.

Cultural changes account for many of the differences between young adults today and their parents at a similar age. Today's young adults have grown up in a society which challenged traditional values, ethics, and beliefs. Tension has been placed on relationships because of the mobility of society and the lack of a familiar, ongoing neighborhood involvement. The past 20 years have witnessed many changes in the relationships of men and women. It is the adolescents and young adults of today who are confronted with the opportunity and burden of carrying through the reform which has begun. Young adults now lack the supports of previous generations when faced with making decisions about relationships, vocations, and lifestyles. They are expected to make adult commitments when much of present society does not promote the personal values of permanence and integrity. Without support from community and Church, many find it difficult to make these commitments.

Because many young adults believe the future will be bleak, postponed gratification may look unattractive. Therefore some young adults are typified by their demands for instant happiness, their early involvement with alcohol and drugs, and their acquisitive, materialistic natures.

Many young adults see themselves as disenfranchised from society's major institutions. Even when willing to sacrifice, they often do not feel their efforts will make a difference. Since they are frequently not welcomed and integrated into adult society, they tend to remain segregated and associate with others of the same age and background. A "youth culture" has emerged which is best characterized as inward-looking.

Many young adults are oppressed by their own lifestyles, which are experimental in nature. It is not surprising that the suicide and divorce rates among young adults continue to increase. The American young adult culture is in danger of adopting a narrow, self-seeking relationship with the rest of the world, as seen in the recent move toward privatism and lessened commitment to social change.

Young adults are seeking meaning in life. They want a sense of inner direction; they want to belong to communities of caring persons. However, most often this searching does not take place in the context of Church or organized religion. Although young adults overwhelmingly believe in God — the proportion of believers has remained consistent over the last 25 years¹¹ — their attendance and involvement in official churches are weak.

For the past year, a committee formed under the sponsorship of the Division of Special Ministries has been examining the questions and needs of young adults — that segment of God's people between 18 and 35. Needless to say, the needs, the concerns and anxieties of these young men and women are sometimes different than we would expect. The following is the summary of the year's work and represents a dialogue with 80 young adults from around the diocese. It is the hope of the Task Force on Young Adult Ministry that in the months ahead the Church may study together the response to these findings.

Members of the committee were Ms. Karen Materna, chair; Father Gerald Appelby, Ms. Patricia Bearsto, Ms. Pamela Belloma, Christopher Felo, Ms. Patricia Genco, Michael Rizzolo, all of the Steering Committee; Father David Mura, Ray Tette.

Most of those who discontinue Church participation do not do so because of a loss of faith, but rather because of interpersonal influences, community relationships, and changed lifestyles.¹² The majority of the presently unchurched had the same traditional religious upbringing as the churched.¹³ Forty-four percent of those under the age of 30 say religious beliefs are "very important" in their lives.¹⁴ Thirty-one percent say their religious consciousness was awakened by "religious or mystical experiences."¹⁵ Yet they do not use traditional Christian language categories to express these experiences. Young adults are involved in TM, yoga, the charismatic movement, mysticism, Eastern religions, and cults. More than 50 percent of the membership of the Unification Church and 42 percent of Hare Krishnas are young adults who were brought up in the Catholic faith.¹⁶

The number of young adults stating no religious preference has grown from 40 percent in 1971 to 55 percent in 1977.¹⁷ Seventy-two percent of all Americans stating no religious preference are between the ages of 18 and 34.¹⁸ There has also been a steady growth in the number of Americans who say they have had no religious upbringing at all.¹⁹

Of all developmental groups, young adults are most at odds with the moral teaching and authority of the Church. Although young adults should comprise the largest segment of our Sunday congregations, a look around any typical parish church will demonstrate that they do not. Only 37 percent of young adults who consider themselves Catholic attend Mass weekly, while 25 percent attend yearly or less.²⁰ Catholic young adults often lack knowledge of very basic Church doctrines and, even when positively inclined, find it both difficult and embarrassing to defend and explore religious beliefs.²¹

Young adults have distanced themselves in different ways from the religious tradition in which they were raised. Some maintain a limited religious association and a low level of religious practice. Some totally disassociate from Church, either to go to another denomination or to discontinue all involvement with organized religion. Others maintain a religious association but express displeasure with the quality of services being offered in the local parish. Some stay within the denomination but refuse to accept many aspects of its official teaching.²²

Many Catholic young adults regard the Church as part of the oppression that exists in the world. Even when the Church has embodied Christ's teachings on peace and justice in a radical way, it has not done so in a way visible to most young adults.²³

There are, however, positive signs. Ninety percent of young adults believe in God, 75 percent in the resurrection, 60 percent in life after death. Seventy-five percent believe Christ is the Son of God, 75 percent read the Bible, and 80 percent pray at least occasionally.²⁴ The majority of young adults have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the Church or organized religion,²⁵ and they feel religion can answer today's problems.²⁶ In one survey response, 40 percent of young adults said "thoughts of God or religion had affected their actions within the previous 24 hours." Forty-nine would like to give some time to Church activities.²⁷ Some young adults are choosing theological and ministerial training as a professional, vocational choice, even though they are not certain how they will be accepted by the Church.²⁸

Both the churched and unchurched criticize organized religion as having lost "the real spiritual part of religion" and a "being too concerned with organizational as opposed to theological or spiritual issues." It is significant that, while both groups share the same concerns, some have left the Church while others have chosen to remain. Also significant is the fact that 25 percent of the presently churched had a period of two or more years when they were among the unchurched.²⁹ Yet they came back.

The Church's tradition regarding the dignity of the person has much to offer young adults who are struggling with the issues of cultural change, meaningful work, relationships, human sexuality, and powerlessness. The Church offers a sense of belonging rooted in personal encounter with the Lord.³⁰ The Church can help young adults apply the Gospel message to their own lifestyles and relationships. To do this, the Church must learn the language and symbols of young adult life. Church leaders must enter into dialogue with young adults. This does not mean, however, that the Church should compromise its message.³¹

Young adults need the integration, the wholeness that comes through liturgical celebrations and the sacraments. They want greater spiritual nourishment than they are now receiving. Many want to explore their faith and learn more about prayer. Young adults want a deeper level of involvement than activities or recreation.³²

The U.S. Catholic Conference offered the following directions for ministry to single young adults. These can be applied to all young adults as well:

1. ministry of presence — outreach and hospitality; meeting young adults in their surroundings; speaking to their primary need to be loved and valued.
2. ministry of listening — listening to the stories of young adults from diverse cultural settings.³³
3. ministry of healing — healing the pain and brokenness in the lives of many young adults and also healing that in the lives of older adults which causes them to exclude young adults.³⁴
4. ministry of integration — helping young adults feel accepted in parish communities so they can share their gifts with others.

The purpose of the study which follows is to help the Church of Rochester to address the needs of young adults and the

problems articulated above. The process that was utilized will be explained in the next section.

The Process

At the beginning of 1980, Father Gerald Appelby, Director of the Division of Special Ministries in the diocese, convened a group to focus conversation on the subject of young adult ministry. The members of the group were invited to participate because of their specific expertise in some area related to Young Adult Ministry. They included: Sister Roberta Tierney, Director of the Division of Education; Father Lewis Brown, Director of the Department of Religious Education; Father William Lum, Director of the Department of Campus Ministry; Sister Shirley Pilot, Campus Ministry at Rochester Institute of Technology and a former missionary with six years of experience working with base communities in Brazil; and Father Gerald Appelby.

The original group held several meetings from February through June of that year. The result of their work was an invitation to several young adults, already involved in the Church of Rochester, to form a core group or steering committee. The task of this core group was to enable a cross-section of young adults in the diocese to be heard by those holding office in the local Church, particularly the bishop and his staff.

The Task Force developed a two-pronged approach to enable both churched and unchurched (or alienated) Catholic young adults to be heard:

1. For the churched: three regional meetings were set up to provide a forum for young adults to express their opinions, concerns, needs, and suggestions. These were held at Blessed Sacrament Church, Rochester; St. Mary's Church, Rochester; and St. Mary's Church, Auburn. The meetings included a discussion period and time spent completing questionnaires formulated by the Task Force (see the Appendices). Questionnaires were also circulated informally by members of the Task Force and other interested people.
2. For the unchurched: persons associated with Antioch and Spiritual Singles, as well as youth ministers and students on local campuses, agreed to distribute questionnaires to their friends and acquaintances who had left the Church or were only minimally involved with Church.

The Task Force then summarized the findings from the questionnaires and regional meetings, isolated major trends and problem areas, and drew up a list of action steps. These action steps are to be recommended as the first step in the Church of Rochester's formal ministry to and with young adults. The core group recognizes the complexity of underlying issues and the complex responses which they necessitate. The group's goal is to offer not pat answers, but directions in which ministry can grow. After a year's work, the Task Force realizes that ministry cannot be imposed from above but must develop in dialogue.

Areas of Concern Identified by Young Adults in the Diocese of Rochester

The ten areas discussed in this section surfaced repeatedly and consistently in the dialogues with young adults. These are not the positive things that were said, but rather areas with which sincere people are having difficulty. This section will focus on the concerns of young adults, not their affirmations of the Church. Some of these concerns can be dealt with on the diocesan or local parish level by attitudinal changes on the part of pastoral staffs and congregation members, by different kinds of programs, or by new thrusts in ministry. Some are issues regarding the universal Church where, to a much lesser degree, changes can be made within the diocese. These issues are perhaps signs of the human weaknesses of a pilgrim Church striving to live the Good News in the world. Or, in some cases, they might be signs that young adults are incorrectly perceiving or rejecting the message of the Church.

1. The Church's Ambivalence

Young adults see a dichotomy between what the Church says and what it does. In the regional meetings people spoke positively of the Church's proclamation of the dignity of each person and the value of every human life. In a world where human life is so often trivialized and depersonalized, the Church has spoken strongly for the rights of the poor and oppressed. The Church's stand on the side of the oppressed in South America is one instance where both message and action are consistent. However, there are many other situations where the Church is viewed as the oppressor or as the institution from which liberation is needed. In response to the question "What don't you like about the Roman Catholic Church?" one person answered, "[its] monetary holdings throughout the world. The Church is too unwilling to give up its stock, real estate, money, and treasures to help the poor." While the Church condemns abortion, little is done publicly to enhance the lives of those unmarried women who choose to bear their children. While the Church speaks of the inherent dignity of each individual, it denies full participation in its life to all women solely on the basis of their sex.

2. Morality

The Church's statements regarding personal morality do not resonate with the lived experience of young adults. In the minds of young adults the Church says two main things about morality: no birth control and no abortion. There is to be no premarital sex and, even after marriage, love is not the primary reason for sexual intercourse. Abortion is a serious sin committed by the woman involved. These statements are admittedly simple and superficial; they ignore the complexity of the writings of Church leaders and moral theologians. Yet, these are the positions most Catholic young adults identify as those of the Church.

The Church's teaching on birth control is not well accepted by the majority of the young adults who responded to the questionnaire. One person said, "Sometimes I believe the Church doesn't know the first thing about human sexuality. Its stand on sexuality has given most Catholics many psychological hangups. Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating free sex. Just basic honest human sexuality." Another stated, "The Church's teachings on the dignity of the person and social justice are important to me. However, I cannot relate their teachings on sexuality, birth control to my life. Most people I know are simply ignoring most of these teachings."

Furthermore, Church statements on personal morality do not speak to the issues young adults are facing. Young adults are dealing with the question of intimacy — whether or not to

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