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KEEPING
CURRENT

Young People and Liturgy: Catechesis for Involvement

THE PROBLEM

They sit in the back pew, slouched down, eyes glazed over with the look of people totally out of step with what is happening around them. I often wonder why they come at all. Their plaintive cries never change. "Mass is boring." "I get nothing out of it." "It's always the same." Our parish teenagers present us with a particular challenge when it comes to liturgical practice. Youth ministers share wonderful stories of the deep spirituality of the young. Religious educators also share stories of teenagers who express their hunger for a clearer understanding of our faith ways. Yet, liturgists, pastors, and parents describe teens' liturgical practice as uninvolved. Why? What do we need to do? The Church offers a rich liturgical life. Youth ministry and liturgical ministry must join in encouraging genuine involvement that is rooted in sound liturgical practice as well as sound catechetical values. Recently the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) surveyed fifty parishes identified by diocesan staffs as ones that had reputations for enthusiastic and widespread involvement of youth in liturgy. The NFCYM reported some noticeable trends in those parishes: First, eager openness obtains when youth participate in preparation for liturgy or are involved as liturgical ministers. Second, youths return to worship that is engaging and respectful of diverse cultures. The key notion is involvement. Most young people appreciate diversity and have an innate fascination with variants based on the norm. Liturgy that includes ethnic music, a careful and powerful proclamation of the Scriptures, and ritual practices from diverse cultures (such as the African-centric custom of calling people to worship with drum beats) are well-received. Third, worship in which the assembly is actively involved in responses and music commands the attention of youths. Fourth, youth involvement is secured through consistent and nurturing support of parish staff. And finally, when the entire parish regards young people with acceptance and welcome, teens request involvement not only in liturgy but in other arenas of parish life as well.

WHAT IS "GOOD" LITURGY?

The celebration of the liturgy should correspond to the genius and culture of different peoples. In order that the mystery of Christ be made known to all the nations, it must be proclaimed, celebrated and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled. It is with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God's children have access to the Father (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1204).

The NFCYM Committee on Youth and Worship, in consultation with other organizations that deal with liturgy, such as the National Pastoral Musicians, identified some key components for liturgical worship that engages youth. They found that the following things are necessary: (1) good preaching that enables the perception of relevance of worship to daily life; (2) physical and oral engagement by the assembly; (3) catechesis of the rich symbols of the liturgy; (4) the worshipping community must present an aura of welcome and specifically engage youth; (5) preparation for liturgy must intentionally involve youth in planning and ministries. These findings are reminiscent of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, paragraph 14, which encourages the full, conscious, and active participation that is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, to which the people have a right and for which they have an obligation because they are baptized into the self-offering of Christ.

THE VOICE OF THE YOUNG

Brian, age 17: "I go to Mass to worship God, to pray for the needs of the poor and to share communion with my parish family. Sometimes I do find the Mass boring. I have to work harder during these times to remember why I am there . . . not just for what I get out of it, but to join others in prayer. The best Masses for me are those with upbeat, lively music, creative ways to celebrate, and good, powerful lectors. I know everyone might not like that style, but my friends and I do. I participate better when I understand the homily and relate it to my life. But don't get me wrong. I don't mind going to Mass, especially if I am lectoring or serving. I think my week would have a void without it."

Jackie, age 16: "I love attending Mass with my family. It's an important part of our week. I feel really close to God when the whole church sings and sways to the music. One of the best

Masses was at a National Youth Conference. There were over 7,000 kids and the priest had us shout out our 'Amens' and 'Alleluias' and 'Praise Jesus!' It made me proud of my African-American roots and it made me feel real close to the Church. Singing is a big part of liturgy in my parish!"

Indeed, teenagers are aware and serious members of the assembly, and often the young themselves are the best advocates for engaging other youths in parish activities. Their voices may well be the most powerful way for other youth to identify the baptismal connection between liturgical worship and every moment of their lives.

CHALLENGES

One of the central psychosocial tasks of adolescence is to become independent. As young people explore how to become more autonomous in relation to authority, they often call accepted values into question, especially institutional religion. On one hand, the last few generations of teenagers and young adults have often rejected much of what society has held dear, especially in the realm of organized religion. But on the other hand, there is a heightened interest and involvement in spirituality and an expressed hunger for experiences that convey a variety of modes of the experience of God.

Because of their youth and because they have not been party to shaping the traditions of the past, young people feel little responsibility to adhere to these traditions, even though these religious roots have provided their elders with a rich prayer life steeped in liturgical celebrations. Consequently, the young need intentional catechesis on the history and richness of liturgical life, as well as opportunities for liturgical celebrations of the faith as essential to genuine spirituality. Such experiences have the potential to provide the social bonding with the community of faith that precisely empowers mature growth toward independence.

In an entertainment-centered youth culture, it is incumbent upon youth ministers to do their homework on liturgical norms, especially for the Liturgy of the Word. They likewise need to encourage excellent preaching, lest we fall into the trap of trying to entertain rather than to help the young recognize the liturgical encounter with Christ. We have a marvelous opportunity to create an atmosphere of discernment regarding competence among the young (and all others in the parish!) to proclaim the Scriptures. The readings have their own power and will engage the

young if they are read well. For example, the letters of Paul would be well read precisely as letters, and the gospel with a transparency that enables the voice of Christ to interpret lives. If each reading were proclaimed as if it had never been heard before, conveying a word of interpretation for the assembly, all members of the congregation would be well served in hearing the Good News.

What resources do we have? How do we educate and catechize so that the public worship of the Church might become the rich source of interpretation of the lives of those who follow after us in the faith? Thomas Groome names catechesis as the activity of reechoing or retelling the story of Christian faith handed down from past generations. For young people today, the liturgy, as essential to the transmission of the story, has been seriously jeopardized. Perhaps because of a loss of the sense of the holiness of the activity, youths do not readily sense the power and importance of the liturgy because, for the most part, they have not been well catechized about the manner in which the Catholic Christian tradition employs symbols. They know that the raiders of the lost ark were searching for something sacred, but their own search is blinded by their perception that liturgy is nothing more than a mundane ritual to be endured at their parents' insistence. The current situation cries out for a catechesis for involvement that stands upon sound liturgical theology and practice.

The Catholic Christian Tradition is filled with assertions that we cannot endure for long without the full celebration of the Eucharist. Our young need to hear of the earliest disciples, gathered to hear the interpretation of their lives through the proclamation of the Scriptures, the address of God in praise and thanksgiving, and in partaking of the Body of Christ, which is Christ and his members. They need to hear of those witnesses to the faith whose strength of character has the potential to capture their imaginations and by which they, too, might carry the gospel in their very bodies to a hungry world. The heroes of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* cannot compare to the Spirit-filled disciples of the Christ announced in the celebration of the Eucharist. Our young have a baptismal right to be drawn into the public, social activity by which all the generations have come to know who they are: bound together in Christ by the power of the Spirit to the glory of God for the peace and salvation of all the world. It is our challenge to share such treasures so their hearts will burn within them (Luke 24:22), so they might know they are part of a com-

munity of disciples that extends throughout the centuries, and so they might know the reign of God continues to come through the giving of their lives.

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